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# **The militant politics of Auguste Blanqui**

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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### Abstract

Auguste Blanqui (1805-81) is arguably at once the most important and most overlooked revolutionary of the nineteenth century. This thesis aims to shed new light on Blanqui's thought by examining his unpublished manuscripts and recent anthologies of his writings that have yet to receive sustained critical engagement. I contend that politics is the central category through which to read and interpret Blanqui's entire project. To this end, I reconstruct what I take to be the fundamental elements of Blanqui's politics, arguing that it remains rooted at every moment in his concept of '*pensée-volonté*', or conscious volition. This groundwork provides a platform from which I advance my own readings as well as engaging with previous interpretations that, though stimulating and useful, nonetheless often remain limited because of their incomplete view of Blanqui's overall body of work. More than previous studies, I seek to resituate Blanqui within the wider revolutionary tradition from which he has hitherto been largely excluded that begins with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and continues through Karl Marx to Che Guevara, showing the extent to which Blanqui advanced and developed the political assumptions of those who preceded him on the one hand, and anticipated the politics of those who succeeded him on the other. Unlike all previous studies, I read Blanqui with and through more recent political thought as a means to both better critically assess Blanqui and to explore in turn how he can contribute to contemporary theoretical discussions. I suggest that despite his limitations with regard to questions of popular consciousness and the contexts and conditions of political struggles, in many crucial respects Blanqui lucidly outlines some of the basic elements of collective political action in his time and our own, from the subjective requirements of political actors to the rejection of historical necessity.



### Introduction: Blanqui rediscovered

‘It really must be stressed that it is precisely the first elements, the most elementary things, which are the first to be forgotten. However, if they are repeated innumerable times, they become the pillars of politics and of any collective action whatsoever.’<sup>1</sup>

Auguste Blanqui is a singular figure. Described as the link between Babeuf and Bolshevism,<sup>2</sup> Blanqui occupies a unique position in the history of revolutionary politics: neither ‘utopian’ socialist nor Marxist, insofar as his project unifies many of the most salient features of Rousseau’s philosophy and the radical politics of the French Revolution with various strands of nineteenth-century social theory, he is perhaps best understood as a neo-Jacobin communist, a resolute political militant of absolute social equality.<sup>3</sup> In wrestling with issues of power and agency, choice and commitment, Blanqui’s enterprise poses some of the most fundamental and inescapable questions in politics: How and when can revolutionary change occur, and, conversely, through which strategies and mechanisms is it suppressed? What is the role of consciousness in the construction of both an individual and a collective political subject? What does it mean and what does it take to be a militant and a revolutionary, to sustain a commitment and pursue an ideal? How should one understand and react to obstacles and difficulties, to defeat and failure? Blanqui’s responses to such questions are not always satisfactory - as with any other political theory Blanqui’s has its shortcomings and limitations; perhaps more than many other

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci, ‘The Modern Prince’, in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> Edward S. Mason, ‘Blanqui and Communism’, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Dec. 1929), p. 498; Maurice Dommanget, *Auguste Blanqui à Belle-Île* (Paris: Librairie du Travail, 1935), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> See Alan B. Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), pp. 3, 111-112. The term neo-Jacobin communism is an amalgamation of Spitzer’s evocation of a ‘Jacobin Communism’ and Peter Hallward’s usage of ‘neo-Jacobin’. See Peter Hallward, ‘The Will of the People: Notes Towards a Dialectical Voluntarism’, *Radical Philosophy*, 155 (May-June 2009), pp. 17-29; Peter Hallward, ‘Defiance or emancipation?’, *Radical Philosophy*, 183 (Jan.-Feb. 2014), pp. 21-32.

political theories Blanqui's lacks rigorous exposition. Even when Blanqui's ideas are under-developed or inadequate, what nonetheless remains in his basic questions and concerns is possibly the most significant theory of militant, revolutionary politics of the nineteenth century, and one which continued to find echoes across the twentieth century. Lenin and Luxemburg, Gramsci and Guevara, Badiou and Bensaïd – in their own times and in their own ways, all stand on the shoulders of Blanqui.

The broad outlines of Blanqui's thought might be resumed as follows. Blanqui insists that all fields and facets of any given established order, from social relations and economic production to popular morality, are subordinate to the primacy of politics. Politics is, first and foremost, the real battle - whether clearly stated or concealed and denied – of the ideas that determine social arrangements and the exercise of power. Thought and intellectual consciousness have a foundational role in Blanqui's thought; to be human is to think. Human beings' capacity for thought, and the extent to which it is freely exercised or suppressed, forms the basis of Blanqui's socio-politics. Blanqui's notions of justice and equality, conviction and faith on the one hand, and of domination and exploitation, deceit and duplicity, manipulation and opportunism on the other, are all built on his concept of intellectual consciousness. Between enlightened reason and reactionary ignorance lies the struggle between emancipation and oppression. Blanqui seeks to continue and extend the Enlightenment project of realising justice through reason. 'L'expérience des siècles démontre que le seul agent du progrès est l'instruction, que la lumière jaillit (presque) uniquement de l'échange (et du choc) des pensées humaines, que par conséquent tout ce qui favorise et multiplie cet échange est le bien, que tout ce qui supprime ou

l'entrave est le mal.'<sup>4</sup> Since human thought dictates humanity's material relations so follows Blanqui's most basic political assumption: 'Plus d'ignorance, plus d'oppression !'<sup>5</sup> Thought, knowledge and reason alone are powerless to influence or change society, however. Thought must be exercised as an act. The sphere of human relations is at every stage an expression of 'une intelligence unie à une volonté', of humanity's capacity for '*pensée-volonté*'.<sup>6</sup> Across his life Blanqui assumes that the social is determined above all not by economics but by politics as *pensée-volonté*; social conflict is primarily the result of political, not economic, antagonisms.

Politics begins, then, with conscious volition. Politics is an actual project collectively undertaken by conscious individuals. The practical imperatives for the realisation of social transformation thus forever remain the primary domain of Blanqui's thought. Blanqui never waivers from the conviction that any conception of emancipatory politics worthy of the name is a matter of 'les moyens pratiques qui, en définitive, sont toute la révolution.' But, as he immediately adds, 'les moyens pratiques se déduisent des principes et dépendent aussi de l'appréciation des hommes et des choses.'<sup>7</sup> Since politics begins with conscious volition it follows that thought and practice are strictly indivisible. 'On peut faire de la politique sérieuse par la plume et par l'action', Blanqui insists. 'Si c'est par la plume, qu'elle soit puissante, dominatrice, qu'elle entraîne. Si c'est par l'action, qu'on organise le peuple pour le

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<sup>4</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 64 [n.d.]. All citations from Blanqui's manuscripts (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Papiers philosophiques d'Auguste Blanqui, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 9578-9598) follow this format, with known dates provided. For the most frequently cited anthologies I have used the following abbreviations: *MA* for *Maintenant, il faut des armes*, ed. Dominique Le Nuz (Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2007); *OI* for *Œuvres I: Des origines à la Révolution de 1848*, ed. Dominique Le Nuz (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1993); and *NDNM* for *Ni Dieu, Ni Maître*, preface Maurice Dommanget (Brussels: Editions Aden, 2009). For *Critique Sociale: 2 vols* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1885), *CSI* and *CSII* respectively refer to the first and second volumes. Texts from all of these anthologies and published volumes will include a date (if known) upon first citation in each chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', 1869-70, *CSI*, p. 190. See also the assertion that 'l'ignorance générale' is the 'rempart de l'inégalité. Seule, la diffusion des lumières aura raison des résistances et fera une réalité de ce qui semble aujourd'hui une chimère' (Blanqui, 'Le luxe', n.d., *CSI*, p. 96).

<sup>6</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3) fo. 53-54 [15 April 1868]; emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', 6 June 1852, *MA*, p. 172.

conduire au combat. Dans les deux cas, il y a un but visible, un résultat positif. Mais on fait de la politique ridicule, en matière de publicité, avec des écrits vulgaires ; en fait d'action, avec des intrigues et des tripotages sans portée.'<sup>8</sup> Blanqui's politics is as much an intellectual conception of the world as it is a form of decisive action to change that world in line with the principled convictions born of that very intellectual consciousness. A revolutionary is 'guidé par la raison et dominé par l'idée de justice'.<sup>9</sup> Revolutionary politics works to 'renverser ce qui existe non point au hasard ni au profit des intrigues, mais en vertu de principes bien arrêtés avec la ferme résolution de construire l'avenir sur les nouvelles bases que fournira le socialisme éclairé, développé et fixé par les événements.'<sup>10</sup> Blanqui's writings are an effort to formulate an account of the decisive factors common to any given concrete political situation. Blanqui's entire project revolves around that most principal of political questions: *Que faire ?*<sup>11</sup> Blanqui's enterprise is one of maintaining intellectual and moral principles as the guide to conscious and determined practical action; of insisting on principled engagement and resolute commitment over compromise and concession; of understanding humanity and society in the present as the prerequisite for its transformation in the future; of comprehending and confronting power – particularly state power – as the central site of political struggle; of aligning political and social change in a 'socialisme pratique'.<sup>12</sup> As such Blanqui should be read, I contend, as a theorist of militant politics.

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<sup>8</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 357 [18 April 1866]. Or as Blanqui summarises elsewhere: 'Les paroles, sans actes pour les appuyer, ne sont qu'un vain soupir. Les actes, sans paroles pour les justifier, ne sont que des crimes. Ne laissons jamais l'un sans l'autre ces deux éléments de la justice' (Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 455 [n.d.]).

<sup>9</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 243 [n.d.].

<sup>10</sup> Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', *MA*, pp. 185-186.

<sup>11</sup> Though Lenin is obviously first to come to mind when evoking this question, it is in fact one that Blanqui poses himself on several occasions. For example, see Blanqui, 'Pourquoi il n'y a plus d'émeutes', 2 February 1834, *OI*, p. 270; Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, p. 203; Blanqui MSS 9587, fo. 378 [n.d.]; 9590(1), fo. 112 [n.d.]; 9590(2), fo. 355 [18 April 1866].

<sup>12</sup> Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', *MA*, p. 185.

This thesis seeks to establish and analyse the basic constituent factors of Blanqui's conception of politics. It should immediately be made clear that by Blanqui's political theory I do not mean strategies for street fighting, the organisational intricacies of the secret society, the plans for a Parisian dictatorship over France, and so on, about which Blanqui has also a great deal to say. Rather, I mean the fundamental assumptions from which these practices are derived. I will lay out what I consider to be the basic elements of what we might call Blanqui's system, in the sense that all its defining components are closely linked, to the point of overlapping in many respects. The key concepts in Blanqui's political thought therefore provide the five chapter headings: Thought, Ideas and Education; Making choices and taking sides; The People and the Proletariat; Voluntarism and Will; History and Progress. My aim is to trace Blanqui's move from assigning a determinant social role to ideas and philosophy to advocating a sustained struggle for progress through the means of principled conviction and popular empowerment while, at all times, maintaining politics and the political as his foremost concern.

The need to reconstruct Blanqui's political thought as a precondition of its analysis is the result of two main factors. First, while his thought is widely misunderstood for reasons we shall contemplate below, the fragmentary nature of his writings does not facilitate reappraisal. The return to Blanqui, to coin a phrase once applied to Marx that could in fact just as easily characterise our present moment, is not simply a case of picking up the classic treatise and working from the obvious point of departure. The core of Blanqui's political thought can be systematically presented, yet this was certainly not the concern of Blanqui himself. He never produced a comprehensive treatise on politics. Analysis of Blanqui's politics first demands a certain amount of groundwork in order to locate and extract its most

consistent underlying assumptions. The task of piecing together fragments and attempting to reconstruct a whole is not to suggest, however, that one should paper over the cracks and present coherence where it may not always be found. Though this is a potential pitfall of the study of any thinker, the point is that a great deal of consistency is found in Blanqui's thought, and it is only in recognising its common, principal features that we can be sure of both its strengths and shortcomings. Second, of the two sustained studies of Blanqui's thought to have appeared,<sup>13</sup> neither proposes to solely and systematically read Blanqui as a political theorist, outlining the foundational elements upon which his politics is built; hence the task remains to be undertaken. Moreover, if one considers the historical moments when such previous studies were conceived, with their radically differing political and intellectual contexts, assumptions and priorities to those of today, the necessity of a renewed reading of Blanqui's politics in light of contemporary historical, political and intellectual developments seems all the more necessary.

A reconstruction of Blanqui's thought through the lens of politics is therefore the aim of this study. I propose to read Blanqui's writings as a whole - such is their overall consistency - whilst nonetheless acknowledging that at certain points a distinction between his early and late thought can be made, and that developments and shifts do occur. I do not claim to provide an exhaustive exploration of Blanqui's thought, nor of his life for that matter. In the case of the latter, biographical details will certainly feature but only where deemed necessary to the understanding of the thought. The decision to not engage at length with economics and religion – Blanqui's two other major intellectual concerns – is more substantive, however. Blanqui never departs from his primarily political position, and where he does so it is only to clarify

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<sup>13</sup> Maurice Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d'Auguste Blanqui* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1957); Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*.

his political approach. I will thus look at the economic and theological aspects of his thought only insofar as they are relevant to the political. Indeed, to expand on the initial observations on Blanqui's thought outlined above, for Blanqui society is ultimately determined not by 'objective' economic or religious forces but by our own conscious choices and actions, which are *political* choices and actions. By the same token, ignorance is the precondition of exploitation in all its forms because it suppresses humanity's capacity for *conscious* volition and with it the collective capacity for socio-political self-determination. Both economic injustice and religious domination are symptoms of popular ignorance that can only be ended through popular enlightenment. The struggle for enlightened instruction, the source of emancipation, therefore remains a primarily political struggle on the part of those capable at present of collectively exercising conscious volition (namely *les déclassés* middle class intellectuals and the atheist workers of Paris), a struggle whose triumph will enable all to exercise this capacity as the basis of a truly free and just society. In this sense, as Blanqui makes clear in a manuscript note entitled 'Un programme bref', politics unifies and actualizes all aspects of his project:

Dans l'ordre intellectuel, point d'autre domination que celle de la science, seule bienfaitrice de l'humanité.

Dans l'ordre moral, point d'autre principe que celui de la justice, c'est-à-dire, de l'égalité et de la solidarité.

Dans l'ordre social, point d'autres droits que ceux du travail.

Dans l'ordre politique, point d'autre but que le triomphe à tout prix des trois grandes lois de la société, la science, la justice, le travail.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Blanqui MSS, 9590(1), fo. 274 [n.d.].

And it is precisely this final point – how can politics serve and ensure the enduring triumph of enlightened reason and social justice? – that dominates Blanqui's thinking. Politics, in short, infuses and animates all of Blanqui's intellectual preoccupations. From his interventions during the *Trois Glorieuses* of July 1830 to the 'hypothèse astronomique' of *L'Éternité par les astres* written while imprisoned in 1871, politics remains the central category through which to understand Blanqui's thought.

Not everyone has shared this view of Blanqui's historico-political importance. To speak of Blanqui is, for many, to speak of political temerity and little else, and to view him as a major figure in the development of modern revolutionary political thought would certainly be contentious. An appreciation of Blanqui's unique life and legacy is therefore also to understand why he has been marginalised from a tradition for which he is crucial.

### **Rebel without a pause**

Revolutionary combatant, self-professed proletarian, militant atheist and insurrectionary strategist; exiled agitator, cosmic speculator, voracious reader and perpetual prisoner; forceful orator, newspaper founder, organiser and leader – Blanqui's life was that of arguably the most significant revolutionary of the nineteenth century.



Without giving a blow-by-blow account of Blanqui's life,<sup>15</sup> some key themes and events are worth highlighting. '[I]n the imagination of a worker generation,' Jacques Rancière observes, July 1830 'plays exactly the same role as May 1968. It is the moment when they decided that "nothing would be as before."' <sup>16</sup> July 1830 changed everything for Blanqui, too. Born in 1805 in Puget-Théniers in the Alpes-Maritimes region of south-east France, at the age of 12 Blanqui enrolled at the Lycée Charlemagne in Paris where he gained a reputation as a brilliant student. He began to study for a degree in Law in 1826. Increasingly politically active as the 1820s progressed – a decade which saw a series of milestones in Blanqui's political genesis, from witnessing the execution of the four sergeants from La Rochelle at Paris's Place de Grève in September 1822<sup>17</sup> to participating in the Parisian revolts of 1827 that left him injured on three occasions<sup>18</sup> - in Blanqui's life July 1830 and its aftermath eclipsed all that went before and remained the point of departure for all that followed. Thereafter the highly formative period from 1830 to 1834 cemented organised political action and political thought as the two constants of his existence. Engagement in Parisian street fighting in July 1830, January 1831, April 1834 and a leading role in the radical republican organisation the *Société des Amis du Peuple* accompanied journalistic work, widely-circulated speeches (notably the 1832 *Défense du Citoyen Louis Auguste Blanqui*) and founding the radical newspaper, *Le*

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<sup>15</sup> For the most complete biographical studies in French see Maurice Dommanget's multi-volume series (see bibliography for details) which cover the course of Blanqui's life. In English see Samuel Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Rancière cited in Donald Reid, 'Introduction', in *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (London: Verso, 2012), p. xiii.

<sup>17</sup> The sergeants were condemned to death for their involvement in the *Carbonari*. Reflecting on the event, Blanqui later wrote of himself: 'il jura de venger ces martyrs de la Liberté' (Blanqui, 'Premier texte autobiographique', 1849-1852, *OI*, p. 40). Cf. Alan B. Spitzer, *Old Hatreds and Young Hopes: The French Carbonari against the Bourbon Restoration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>18</sup> See Blanqui's rather self-aggrandising 'Premier texte autobiographique', *OI*, pp. 40-41. Blanqui later interestingly described the barricades of November 1827 as 'les premières barricades du grand mouvement révolutionnaire du XIXe siècle' (Blanqui, 'Notes de Blanqui sur un texte de Nougès', 1849, *OI*, p. 472).

*Libérateur*, in which Blanqui refined and consolidated his early thinking on the meaning and role of politics while presenting, in turn, his conception of thought, equality and property. The writings between 1832 and 1834 together form the major intellectual statement of his early years, outlining many of the fundamental contours of his political project as it would remain thereafter. It can be no coincidence that Blanqui's rise to prominence began during a period that became known as *le temps des émeutes*, in which popular mobilisations, particularly in Paris and Lyon, continued to challenge the nascent Orléanist order. The course of Blanqui's life was at every step so intimately bound up with every attempt to overthrow the established order in France that the epithet of 'l'enfant du siècle' one biographer attributes to him would find few serious challengers.<sup>19</sup> Yet if history made Blanqui, Blanqui also sought to make history. Blanqui saw possibilities and worked to harness them; he saw pitfalls and worked to overcome them. After all the immense promise of 1830, Louis-Philippe's ascension to the throne and the shoring up of his initially vulnerable Orléanist monarchy's power marked a major defeat in Blanqui's eyes, providing an event that to an arguably greater degree than any other during his lifetime exercised the most enduring influence on his political project. 'Il est honorable d'être dupe,' he suggested in 1846 when looking back on 1830, 'pourvu qu'on ne le soit pas deux fois.'<sup>20</sup> In defeat lessons were learned, resolutions were made. The unmaking of a revolution was the making of a revolutionary.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 'Ecrire la vie de Blanqui', Decaux goes on to note, 'c'est retracer l'histoire des révolutions du XIXe siècle. ... Blanqui est né sous Napoléon, il est mort sous Jules Grévy. Entre ces deux pôles, le biographe découvre une existence hors de la banalité, l'historien apprend ce que fut l'histoire d'un siècle : une aventure démesurée' (Alain Decaux, *Blanqui l'Insurgé* [Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1976], pp. 12, 15). See also Arno Münster, 'Introduction', in Louis Augsute Blanqui, *Ecrits sur la Révolution: Œuvres complètes I textes politiques et lettres de prison*, ed. Arno Münster (Paris: La Galilée, 1977), p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Blanqui, 'Lettre à Ferdinand Flocon', 18 August 1846, *OI*, p. 498.

<sup>21</sup> I owe this formulation to Jonathan Beecher, who coined it with regard to Proudhon and 1848.

Following imprisonment in 1832-33 and again in 1836-37, Blanqui's political organisation and action resumed with no less vigour in the late 1830s, culminating in the May 1839 coup attempt of the *Société des Saisons*, for which he was returned to prison, where he would remain until 1848. As Paris shook Europe once again the course of Blanqui's year mirrored the gravity of the unfolding events: February saw him establish a leading radical political club, the *Société Républicaine Centrale*; March brought the accusation contained in the 'document Taschereau' of betraying former fellow leaders of his secret societies; and May witnessed, following pressure from his followers, the leading of the march on the *Assemblée nationale*, for which he was arrested and imprisoned only weeks before the irruption of the June Days.<sup>22</sup> This seemingly perpetual cycle of engagement-imprisonment-liberation established during the first half of Blanqui's life continued until his death in 1881. But it was a cycle in which engagement remained one of both word and deed. Hence while exiled in Brussels in the late 1860s and cut off from Paris, the capital of revolution in Blanqui's eyes, his theoretical reflections continued, taking the form of *Instructions pour une prise d'armes* (1868), much of the writing posthumously published as the *Critique Sociale* (1885) and the numerous political and philosophical notebooks that comprise many of the Blanqui manuscripts today housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

Having spent in total nearly half of his seventy-six years incarcerated, imprisonment may appear as the defining theme of Blanqui's life, the invariable, bleak background from which only failed political endeavours provide punctuation. *L'Enfermé*, as Gustave Geffroy entitled his 1887 biography, seems an apt epithet for a man imprisoned by all the post-Restoration regimes of the century (July Monarchy, Second Republic, Second Empire, Third Republic). But to foreground imprisonment

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<sup>22</sup> On Blanqui's activities in 1848, see Suzanne Wassermann, *Les Clubs de Barbès et de Blanqui en 1848* (Genève: Mégariotis Reprints, 1978).

should not obscure its essential meaning. Imprisonment was itself political engagement. Although it began as the consequence of a determined, uncompromising commitment to radical social change, it also became the extension of this commitment. Anticipating the stoic resistance of the twentieth-century's most celebrated political prisoners, from Antonio Gramsci to Nelson Mandela, imprisonment did not extinguish Blanqui's political struggle. Deprived of the freedom to act and organise, Blanqui's struggle continued – health permitting – through the written word, with *L'Éternité par les astres* (1872), the remarkable meditation on man and the universe, as the most striking, and perhaps therefore the best-known, example of Blanqui's reflections from behind bars. Prison was thus subject to the same strict moral code Blanqui invoked and applied throughout his life, as seen in his refusal of an amnesty in 1844: 'Non seulement je ne veux ni n'accepte de grâce, mais j'aime mieux, tout cruellement malade que je suis, être sur-le-champ replongé dans un cachot que de redevenir libre sans mes amis.'<sup>23</sup> Revolutionary thought, practice and principle characterized Blanqui's life. The commitment to equality through revolution produced a conceptual unity across times, places, activities and experiences, a fluidity between different platforms of the same struggle.

In his own lifetime Blanqui was a symbol of hope and fear, inspiring both respect and revulsion in equal measure. For the Marx of the first three sections of *The Class Struggles in France*, while '*utopia, doctrinaire Socialism*' is the socialism of the petty bourgeoisie, 'the *proletariat* rallies more and more round *revolutionary socialism*, round *Communism*, for which the bourgeoisie has itself invented the name

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<sup>23</sup> He continued: 'Dites au Ministre, dites-lui bien que *je revendique toute solidarité avec mes complices*. Croirait-on par hasard l'avoir détruite par la violence des tortures, cette solidarité saint ? Jamais ! C'est elle qui nous a soutenus dans nos terribles épreuves, c'est elle seule qui fait notre force, et c'est parce qu'il essayait de la briser que l'acte isolé, dont j'étais menacé, m'a arraché un cri de désespoir' (Blanqui, 'Réponse d'Auguste Blanqui au Maire de Tours', 26 December 1844, *OI*, p. 496). On this event, and why Blanqui would refuse the amnesty, see Le Nuz, 'Introduction', *OI*, pp. 483-484.

of *Blanqui*. This socialism', Marx enthusiastically continues, 'is the *declaration of the permanence of the revolution*, the *class dictatorship* of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionizing of all the ideas that result from these social relations.'<sup>24</sup> In 1879 the ultimately successful campaign to elect Blanqui as *député* for Bordeaux in his absence (Blanqui had remained imprisoned since his arrest on the eve of the 1871 Paris Commune) received the support of the great Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi, who wrote to 'mes frères de la démocratie de Bordeaux' offering his endorsement of 'Blanqui, le martyr héroïque de la liberté humaine.'<sup>25</sup> Eugène de Mirecourt, meanwhile, writing in 1857, describes his subject, as '[l]e plus cynique des démoniaques conjurés pour la perte de la société moderne', 'la bête fauve qui a soif de sang'.<sup>26</sup> Conceding Blanqui's 'talent organisateur' and 'son esprit merveilleusement cultivé' - though only to argue that these traits, as well as 'sa ruse profonde et son audace sans bornes', enabled him to dominate his followers<sup>27</sup> - Mirecourt pours scorn and vitriol over this Machiavellian fanatic, 'le redoutable démagogue'.<sup>28</sup> More considered contemporary accounts were likewise compelled to highlight 'l'espèce de terreur qui s'attache au nom de M.

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<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 117; emphasis in original. The final section of the book, written later in 1850 after Marx had spent the summer in the British Library, reveals a loss of revolutionary enthusiasm and a more economic, if not deterministic, outlook: '*A new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis. It is, however, just as certain as this crisis*' (ibid., p. 126; emphasis in original). Marx reiterates this point more explicitly in the 'Speech on the Anniversary of the *People's Paper*' of 1856: 'Steam, electricity, and the self-acting mule were revolutionists of a rather more dangerous character than even citizens Barbès, Raspail, and Blanqui' (Karl Marx, 'Speech on the Anniversary of the *People's Paper*', in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], p. 368).

<sup>25</sup> Blanqui MSS 9588(1), fo. 205, 209 [n.d.].

<sup>26</sup> Eugène de Mirecourt, *Blanqui* (Paris: Chez L'Auteur, 1857), pp. 7-8

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> See Ibid., pp. 10-12, 18, 26, 59, 61.

Auguste Blanqui. ... Son nom est une hache', Hippolyte Castille noted.<sup>29</sup> It seems the spectre of Blanqui truly haunted nineteenth-century France; it is not without good reason that Walter Benjamin later saw in Blanqui 'the most dreaded adversary' of nineteenth-century French society.<sup>30</sup>

If that was the life, what of the legacy? Accounting for the rise in scholarly interest in the life and work of Blanqui, Edward Mason noted in 1929 that

each generation writes anew its history, re-selecting the facts and altering the emphasis, in accordance with changing interests and ends. This is as true in the history of socialism as elsewhere. Since the Russian Revolution we have seen the increase in magnitude of certain supposedly obscure nineteenth-century revolutionaries and the decrease of others. The historical importance of no one of them, probably, has changed more than that of L.A. Blanqui. In France and in Russia a long list of books has been written during the last ten years, discovering in Blanqui a thinker of considerable importance.<sup>31</sup>

These historiographical observations are no less true today, albeit in a directly inverted sense. On the one hand, for the disciples of our so-called 'post-ideological' and 'consensual' politics, to be confronted with the belief in communism as the 'avenir de la société' undoubtedly leads most to pass over Blanqui as a monstrous harbinger of the catastrophes of the twentieth century, a relic of another age to be cast

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<sup>29</sup> Hippolyte Castille, *L.A. Blanqui* (Paris: F. Sartorius, 1857), pp. 56-57.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 15. On Blanqui as spectre see Daniel Bensaïd and Michael Löwy, 'Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist', *Radical Philosophy*, 185 (May-June 2014), p. 27; Quelques agents du Parti imaginaire, 'Préface: A un ami', *MA*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> Mason, 'Blanqui and Communism', p. 498.

back into obscurity as appropriate.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, just as in 1940 Benjamin took aim at the Social Democrats who ‘managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, the rallying sound that had reverberated through the preceding century’,<sup>33</sup> this sound continued to fall on deaf ears on the left thereafter. ‘Blanqui, « l’Enfermé » de la société capitaliste’, writes Maurice Dommanget, Blanqui’s foremost biographer, ‘est aussi « l’Oublié » du socialisme.’<sup>34</sup> Despite Mason’s own contention that Blanqui deserves recognition as an intellectually and historically important figure, on the whole the radical left has not merely overlooked and neglected Blanqui but turned him into an object of derision, a by-word for theoretical misconception and practical misadventure. It would be little exaggeration to suggest that no other figure in the revolutionary tradition could claim such a distance between their historico-political importance and their historico-political marginalisation as can Blanqui. So how did such a displacement occur? The reasons for Blanqui’s shift from lauded revolutionary to political pariah are at once theoretical and practical.

### **‘Blanqui’ as pejorative signifier**

Many have been - and perhaps forever will be - quick to point out political economy as the major lacuna of Blanqui’s thought.<sup>35</sup> It is, in fact, characteristic of what might be called the orthodox Marxist or Marxist-Leninist critique of Blanqui. Here was an

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<sup>32</sup> Here I am partially paraphrasing Slavoj Žižek’s observations on the incongruity of Robespierre’s ‘politics of Truth’ in our contemporary political conjuncture. See Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 159.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 251-252.

<sup>34</sup> Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d’Auguste Blanqui*, p. 67. Le Nuz reiterates this point: ‘Mais enfermé, Blanqui l’est aussi dans l’oubli que le XXème siècle lui a creusé comme une deuxième tombe’ (Dominique Le Nuz, ‘Introduction’, *MA*, p. 29).

<sup>35</sup> As we shall see, Blanqui was emphatic in his rejection of political economy on the grounds that it takes no consideration of justice and morality. From its first pages the *Critique Sociale*, for example, speaks of ‘l’abîme qui sépare le socialisme de l’économie politique. Ce sont deux conceptions de la société, diamétralement contraires’ (Blanqui, ‘L’usure: Origine et marche d’usure’, n.d., *CSI*, p. 11).

idealist pre-Marxist communist who, though deserving of attention and great admiration for his determined, courageous and unwavering fidelity to the cause of revolution and for grasping the basic nature of class struggle – socialism, contrary to the claims of the ‘utopians’, could not be created through co-operation between rich and poor - was nonetheless ultimately flawed in his inability to understand and adopt the ‘scientific’ theory of socialism.<sup>36</sup> As such, Blanqui, so the critique goes, occupies his own distinct place in the history and development of modern socialist thought: able to lay claim to a more ‘advanced’ understanding of politics and society than the ‘utopian’ socialists, Blanqui nonetheless lacked Marx’s ‘scientific’ knowledge of capitalism, as well as the later organisational innovations of Lenin.<sup>37</sup> The orthodox Marxist interpretation of Blanqui (espoused by Marx himself as he reflected on the failure of 1848, and even more so by Engels)<sup>38</sup> was perhaps best summarised by Stalin: ‘L’histoire connaît des chefs prolétariens, chefs de temps d’orage, chefs du travail pratique, pleins d’abnégation et d’audace, mais faibles en théorie.’<sup>39</sup> Sylvain

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<sup>36</sup> V.P. Volguine, ‘Les idées politiques et sociales de Blanqui’, in *Auguste Blanqui: Textes choisis*. ed. V.P. Volguine (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1955), pp. 7-9, 47; Neil Stewart, *Blanqui* (London: Gollancz, 1939), p. 42.

<sup>37</sup> See Stewart, *Blanqui*, pp. 40-42.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Blanqui is essentially a political revolutionist. He is a socialist only through sentiment, through his sympathy with the sufferings of the people, but he has neither a socialist theory nor any definite practical suggestions for social remedies. In his political activity he was mainly a “man of action”, believing that a small and well organized minority, who would attempt a political stroke of force at the opportune moment, could carry the mass of the people with them by a few successes at the start and thus make a victorious revolution. Of course, he could organize such a group under Louis Philippe’s reign only as a secret society. Then the thing, which generally happens in the case of conspiracies, naturally took place. His men, tired of being held off all the time by the empty promises that the outbreak should soon begin, finally lost all patience, became rebellious, and only the alternative remained of either letting the conspiracy fall to pieces or of breaking loose without any apparent provocation. They made a revolution on May 12th, 1839, and were promptly squelched.... From Blanqui’s assumption, that any revolution may be made by the outbreak of a small revolutionary minority, follows of itself the necessity of a dictatorship after the success of the venture. This is, of course, a dictatorship, not of the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but of the small minority that has made the revolution, and who are themselves previously organized under the dictatorship of one or several individuals. We see, then, that Blanqui is a revolutionary of the preceding generation’ (Frederick Engels, ‘The Program of the Blanquist Fugitives from the Paris Commune’, 26 June 1874, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1874/06/26.htm>>).

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Volguine, ‘Les idées politiques et sociales de Blanqui’, p. 47. It should be made clear that in attributing the essence of this position to Stalin in no way implies a backhanded denunciation of all those who shared this view.



Molinier interestingly proposes Blanqui himself as partially responsible for this myth,<sup>40</sup> which is certainly what he suggested in an interview with *The Times* in 1879. 'I have no theories. I am not a professor of politics or socialism', Blanqui told the British newspaper, 'I am a man of action. What exists is bad, something else must take its place and gradually things will come to what they ought to be.'<sup>41</sup> Even during his lifetime '[s]ome of Blanqui's greatest admirers', including Georges Clemenceau, Spitzer notes, 'denied that Blanqui exhibited any theoretical capacity whatsoever.'<sup>42</sup> Widely regarded as the nineteenth century's 'living symbol of revolutionary action',<sup>43</sup> many nonetheless characterise Blanqui as a 'mindless' revolutionist whose singular belief in the immediate conquest of political power displayed a total ignorance of wider socio-economic forces.<sup>44</sup> Theory, we are told, marks the insurmountable limitation of this 'man of action'; the absence of 'scientific' socialism explains Blanqui's practical errors and misjudgments.<sup>45</sup>

In order to understand the repudiation of Blanqui's practice it is instructive to return to Mason, whose central concern is to consider 'the position of Blanqui as a forerunner and representative of what is now called communism' and to establish 'the relation between the revolutionary thought and method of Blanqui and that of Bolshevism.'<sup>46</sup> This reveals a crucial point: the Bolshevik lens through which Blanqui is examined is neither coincidental nor innocent. In many respects, the history of

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<sup>40</sup> Sylvain Molinier, *Blanqui* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> 'A Visit to Blanqui', *The Times*, Monday April 28 1879 cited in Stewart, *Blanqui*, pp. 318-320.

<sup>42</sup> Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> Gustave Geffroy, *L'Enfermé II* (Paris: Les Editions G. Crès et et Cie, 1926), pp. 39-41 cited in Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 157.

<sup>44</sup> See Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 135; Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d'Auguste Blanqui*, pp. 67-71.

<sup>45</sup> Volguine, 'Les idées politiques et sociales de Blanqui', p. 47. In this respect, Bernstein's critique is amongst the most emphatic: 'Blanqui contributed little or nothing to the development of socialist theory. ... [H]e worked out a strategy of revolution which, far more than his socialist theory earned him a place among the supreme revolutionaries in history' (Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection*, p. 205). For the most forthright critiques of Blanqui's life and thought see Maurice Paz, *Un révolutionnaire professionnel, Auguste Blanqui* (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

<sup>46</sup> Mason, 'Blanqui and Communism', pp. 499, 501

studies of Blanqui is the history of Marxism-Leninism. In the wake of the October Revolution, as Mason notes, many looked back to the nineteenth century to seek out the political forebears of Bolshevism. And as the twentieth century unfolded and communism became a global movement of peoples and ideas, Blanqui did generate a certain, albeit relatively minor, level of interest. But many works on Blanqui from this period consistently evaluate their subject relative to the practical ‘success’ – that is, to establish nominally socialist states - of Marxism-Leninism. In a lifetime of political failures, Blanqui, by contrast, did not discover the formula for successfully seizing power or realising social revolution. Owing to its organisational and tactical form – a secret conspiratorial vanguard divorced from the masses that seizes power through a coup and imposes revolution from above – Blanqui’s ‘putchism’, as it is often labelled, was futile from its inception. Leninism could be seen as offering practical confirmation of Blanquism’s errors. In turn, given that Lenin was himself at pains to establish clear daylight between Bolshevism and Blanquism so as to counter numerous accusations to the contrary, not least from Rosa Luxembourg,<sup>47</sup> it follows that all thinkers and movements claiming to descend from the Bolshevik leader were compelled to follow suit, repudiating any association with Blanqui as a matter of course. As a result, even those thinkers and movements who were in fact politically very close to Blanqui never self-identified with him. Here lies another feature of Blanqui’s idiosyncratic status: if the likes of Lenin, Gramsci, Castro and Guevara do indeed stand on the shoulders of Blanqui then they do so with uniform

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<sup>47</sup> See Rosa Luxembourg, ‘In Memory of the Proletarian Party’, 1903 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1903/02/proletariat-party.htm>> and ‘Organisational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy’, 1904 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1904/questions-rsd/>>; Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 1917, ch. 6 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/>> and ‘Marxism and Insurrection’, September 1917 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/13.htm>>

unconsciousness, to not say conscious unwillingness.<sup>48</sup> And if Blanqui's political enterprise was dismissed and overlooked precisely because of its 'unscientific', 'wild voluntarism', the intellectual landscape of Western Europe over the past fifty years has only served to reinforce this trend. Structuralism and Althusserian Marxism in particular explicitly rejected notions that distinguish Blanqui's thought – a militant subject, an anti-determinist refutation of any historical laws, humanity as the agent of its own history – as 'ideology', asserting instead the primacy of economic structures and objective historical processes.<sup>49</sup> So if 1917 did indeed lift Blanqui out of obscurity it was merely to justify his previous marginalisation and exclusion, to where he would be returned in good time. To read Blanqui in the twentieth century was simply a means to greater, more worthy ends: understanding Marx the scientist of history, the prophet of revolution, and Lenin the strategist, the organiser. To evoke Blanqui in political terms was not an unavoidable ideological label or historical marker like any other but an insult, a pejorative signifier for a sort of a-theoretical, impatient adventurism. The name 'Blanqui' and its derivations ('Blanquist',

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<sup>48</sup> Trotsky is the notable exception to this rule. Chapter 43 of *The History of the Russian Revolution*, entitled 'The Art of Insurrection', reflects at length on the link between conspiracy and popular insurrection. Trotsky dismisses the view that 'popular insurrection and conspiracy are in all circumstances mutually exclusive. An element of conspiracy almost always enters to some degree into any insurrection. Being historically conditioned by a certain stage in the growth of a revolution, a mass insurrection is never purely spontaneous. ... But a mass insurrection can be foreseen and prepared. It can be organised in advance. In this case the conspiracy is subordinate to the insurrection, serves it, smoothes its path, hastens its victory.' This leads Trotsky to describe Blanquism as 'the revolutionary essence of Marxism'. As he explains: 'Insurrection is an art, and like all arts it has its laws. The rules of Blanqui were the demands of a military revolutionary realism. Blanqui's mistake lay not in his direct but his inverse theorem. From the fact that tactful weakness condemns an insurrection to defeat, Blanqui inferred that an observance of the rules of insurrectionary tactics would itself guarantee the victory. Only from this point on is it legitimate to contrast Blanquism with Marxism. Conspiracy does not take the place of insurrection. An active minority of the proletariat, no matter how well organised, cannot seize the power regardless of the general conditions of the country. In this point history has condemned Blanquism. But only in this. His affirmative theorem retains all its force. In order to conquer the power, the proletariat needs more than a spontaneous insurrection. It needs a suitable organisation, it needs a plan: it needs a conspiracy. Such is the Leninist view of this question' (Trotsky, 'The History of the Russian Revolution. Volume Three: The Triumph of the Soviets', 1930, ch. 43 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch43.htm>>)

<sup>49</sup> For an overview of the manner in which voluntarist politics and the primacy of political will are dismissed not only by structuralist-inspired philosophy but by the entire field of recent European philosophy and critical theory more generally, see Hallward, 'The Will of the People', pp. 19-20.

‘Blanquism’) spelled naivety at best, at worst outright ignorance. Though a handful of studies problematised and challenged such interpretations,<sup>50</sup> this is the prevailing mode of thinking according to which Blanqui has been remembered to this day.

But with the fall of the Berlin Wall a whole set of historiographical and political orthodoxies and presuppositions came crashing down, too. In the ruins of Soviet communism the importance of Leninism cannot and certainly should not be downplayed, much less ignored. Its innovations and perversions, insights and contradictions must still be addressed with all the requisite vigour and candour. But it is also time to broaden and extend our historical and intellectual horizons in search of new ‘moments’ in the history of emancipation, ‘moments’ in which an exploration of radical equality, ‘an effective reframing of what the “common” means, a reconfiguration of the universe of the possible’ warrant interest and engagement, however seemingly ephemeral or ‘obscure’.<sup>51</sup> Just as we can now rediscover Marx as a thinker in his own right, our post-Soviet times provide an intellectual opening, exhilarating in potential, limitless in scope, in which to liberate Blanqui as well as other hitherto marginalised movements and actors from the constraints of any formerly dominant ‘official’ history with its purported canon, interpretations and hierarchies.<sup>52</sup> It is in this sense that recently Alain Badiou instructively aligned Blanqui alongside the likes of Spartacus, Thomas Münzer, Robespierre, Toussaint-

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<sup>50</sup> See in particular Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d'Auguste Blanqui*; Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*; and more recently, Le Nuz, ‘Introduction’ in *Maintenant, il faut des armes*; Jacques Rancière, ‘The Radical Gap: A preface to Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*’, *Radical Philosophy*, 185 (May-June 2014), pp. 19-25; Bensaïd and Löwy, ‘Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist’, pp. 26-35; Peter Hallward, ‘Blanqui’s Bifurcations’, *Radical Philosophy*, 185 (May-June 2014), pp. 36-44.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘Communists Without Communism?’, in *The Idea of Communism*, eds. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2010), p. 173.

<sup>52</sup> Of course, the vocation of rediscovering those consigned to the dustbin of history is not a new one. Edward Thompson’s preface to *The Making of the English Working Class* remains the unsurpassed articulation of how and why we should continually give voice to history’s voiceless. ‘Only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered’, Thompson writes. ‘The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten’ (E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* [London: Penguin, 1991], pp. 11-12).

L'Ouverture, Marx, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Mao and Che Guevara as individuals whose proper names historically define and symbolise the various sequences of revolutionary politics.<sup>53</sup> All these figures and the historical moments they represent can contribute to an understanding of the notions of equality and emancipation. To paraphrase Mason, today we must write anew the history of communism and the revolutionary tradition, in accordance with necessarily changing interests and ends, and without 'success' as the sole qualification for entry. Edward Thompson once contended that history's supposed failures and 'lost causes' may in fact provide 'insights into social evils which we have yet to cure'.<sup>54</sup>

### **The primacy of politics**

Today we should rediscover in Blanqui not only a man of action but also a man of ideas. Blanqui did not produce an elaborate or general theory of politics - nor did he strive to. Blanqui did, however, formulate ideas and concepts that distinguish him as a political thinker of enduring import. Although Blanqui's writings often seem to focus on immediate and local political exigencies, appearing as products of specific historical conjunctures<sup>55</sup> (the most striking example of this being the articles produced for the newspaper he founded during the Franco-Prussian war, *La Patrie en Danger*), they need not be reduced and confined to these specific historico-political conjunctures and can be read as the point of departure for more general political

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<sup>53</sup> Alain Badiou, 'The Idea of Communism', in *The Idea of Communism*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>54</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 12.

<sup>55</sup> Two recent texts insist on this point: the *Quelques agents du Parti imaginaire* describe Blanqui's writings as '*circonstanciés* ... chargés des conditions dans lesquelles et contre lesquelles ils sont écrits... D'où l'inexistence de l'œuvre de Blanqui, au sens de ce qui recueille en soi le tout d'un trésor' (*Quelques agents du Parti imaginaire*, 'Préface: A un ami', *MA*, p. 25). In the same volume Le Nuz likewise asserts that 'il s'est attaché à régler les urgences et à satisfaire les besoins immédiats, sans jamais laisser la théorie prendre le pas sur l'action. Cette autolimitation a certainement nui à sa postérité' (Le Nuz, 'Introduction', *MA*, p. 44).

reflection on the nature of, amongst other things, power, history and education. Even a text conceived in a moment of clear strategic urgency such as *Un Dernier Mot*, for instance, published as the Prussians neared the gates of the French capital and summarizing much of Blanqui's writing in *La Patrie en Danger*, nevertheless begins by bringing Blanqui's views on fatalism to bear on the political situation.<sup>56</sup> A work like *Instructions pour une prise d'armes* is not simply a tactical manual for barricade fighting in nineteenth-century Paris; it elucidates the role of popular forces, organisation and leadership, commitment and conscious purpose that inform and ultimately determine any revolutionary process. Conceptually limited, frustratingly aphoristic, occasionally contradictory and frequently overstated, a theory of politics Blanqui's work nonetheless remains, rich in insight, lucid in expression, prescient in outlook.

Blanqui's politics unites humanism, communism and voluntarism. Like Rousseau, Marx, Lenin and many others, all facets of Blanqui's political project ascribe political primacy to *conscious human activity*. 'Machiavelli wrote books of "immediate political action", and not utopias', Gramsci notes, in a passage that applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Blanqui. 'In his treatment, in his critique of the present, he expressed general concepts – presented, however, in aphoristic rather than in systematic form – and an original conception of the world. This conception of the world too could be called "philosophy of praxis", or "neo-humanism", in as much as it does not recognise transcendent or immanent (in the metaphysical sense) elements, but bases itself entirely on the concrete action of man, who ... works and transforms reality.'<sup>57</sup> Blanqui's politics is defined by direct writing so as to produce direct action;

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<sup>56</sup> The concept of fatalism had pervaded Blanqui's thought during the preceding decade.

<sup>57</sup> Gramsci, 'State and Civil Society', in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 248-249. On Blanqui's interest in Machiavelli, see Gustave Geffroy, *L'Enfermé* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1919), pp. 244-245.

it is a politics of courage and determination, of conviction and faith; it is a politics that forecloses compromise and presupposes conflict; it is a politics of the everyday plight of the oppressed, rendering visible and audible the otherwise overlooked and unheard; it is a politics that seizes and retains power as the necessary condition for the transformation of both man and society; it is a politics born of defeat and disappointment that seeks to learn from failure, to begin again, to create, to continue. It is, above all, a politics of autonomous human activity over positivism, determinism and fatalism; of autonomous human activity over the necessary forward march of history or the inevitability of progress; of autonomous human activity over any form of objective political, social or economic laws as the agent of historical change. Finally, in all such respects, for Blanqui politics is indivisible from the course of our finite human existence. Both individually and collectively, the lives we lead, the conscious choices we make and the voluntary actions we take ultimately determine our collective social arrangements. And like Che Guevara after him, Blanqui's singularity resides in the extent to which he unified in his life, in himself, the revolutionary ideas, the revolutionary action and the revolutionary subjectivity or 'virtues' that form the three pillars of his political project.<sup>58</sup> For both Blanqui and Guevara alike it is this conception of politics as a determined and enduring personal, indeed moral commitment to the point of self-sacrifice that accounts for the widespread devotion and following they inspired, particularly amongst the young, becoming themselves revolutionary symbols in their own respective times. Blanqui's life was not a substitute for a doctrine, nor can his actions be reduced to mere stylistic-symbolic deed, performance, gesture (as some sympathisers contend) or

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<sup>58</sup> As Mason observes: 'There is an extraordinary unity in the life of Blanqui: a blending of thought and action, a singleness of purpose and a monotony of experience which makes of him a figure clear-cut in its significance' (Mason, 'Blanqui and Communism', p. 501).

affectation (as some detractors suggest).<sup>59</sup> Rather, the life was the forceful expression and actualization of the doctrine, the subjectivation of the idea in a ‘pure singularity of body and thought’.<sup>60</sup> To foreground subjectivity should not obscure the idea, for both were one and the same, combining in a ‘practical idealism’, to adopt a formula recently proposed by Étienne Balibar, in which individual and collective subjects are at once ‘dreaming of another world and ready to sacrifice much of their lives, sometimes all of it, for their conviction’.<sup>61</sup> In revolutions and insurrections, writings and speeches, trials and imprisonment, illness and solitude, Blanqui’s militant politics is his militant life, and vice versa.

In foregrounding the revolutionary humanism and voluntarism of Blanqui’s communist politics my return to Blanqui posits that the very reasons for his neglect, marginalisation and being the object of derision are precisely why he should now be rediscovered. Alan Spitzer noted in the late 1950s how some of the central tenets of Blanqui’s theory were ‘taken for granted as theoretical foundations’ of revolutionary socialism to the point of becoming ‘commonplace and so directly related to action that they are not usually dignified with the label of “theory”’.<sup>62</sup> Can the same really be said today? Has Blanqui’s humanist-voluntarist conception of politics not been widely forgotten, if not entirely discredited, in the intervening decades? Is conscious volition still maintained as ultimately determinant of political action and the ensuing social arrangements? Is the seizure of power at present ‘the primary strategic objective’, as

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<sup>59</sup> Geffroy contends that ‘his life ... is itself a creation and his only doctrine’ (cited in Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 17; see also Decaux, *Blanqui l’Insurgé*, p.634 for the same conclusion), while the ‘Quelques agents du Parti imaginaire’ describe ‘l’absence ... d’une doctrine blanquiste, comme il y a une métaphysique marxiste’ highlighting instead ‘un style blanquiste’ in which passion is a fundamental trait (Quelques agents du Parti imaginaire, ‘Préface: A un ami’, in *MA*, p. 25). For a similar view of the importance of style in Blanquism, see Patrick H. Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition: The Blanquists in French Politics, 1864-1893* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), ch. 8.

<sup>60</sup> Badiou, ‘The Idea of Communism’, p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> Étienne Balibar, ‘Communism as Commitment, Imagination and Politics’, in *The Idea of Communism Volume 2*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2013), p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, pp. 27, 181-182.



Guevara insisted after Blanqui?<sup>63</sup> Is the need for forms of political organisation and leadership indisputable today? Is principled conviction, to the exclusion of compromise and concession, now held as the basic condition of any political engagement worthy of the name? As Gramsci observes in the citation that serves as the epigraph for this introduction, it is precisely the most basic assumptions that are the most rapidly neglected as the basis of collective political action. In rediscovering Blanqui's militant politics we are forced to reflect on the theoretical assumptions of his time as of our own.

To advance the utility and relevance of aspects of Blanqui's account of emancipatory politics is not to deny its manifest limitations, however. I will suggest two main problems with Blanqui's project. First, Blanqui's conception of conscious volition too often overstates the gap between knowledge and ignorance, between who has and who lacks at present the intellectual capacities that decisive voluntary action demands. This leaves him unable to formulate a convincing account of politics as *self*-emancipation on the one hand, often pushing him towards substitutionist organisational forms and practices on the other. Second, while Blanqui's politics serves as an important antidote to a certain form of Marxian economic determinism, it fails to offer a sustained account of the objective socio-economic forces and conditions on which subjective political forces appear and act, although it does take some consideration, albeit limited, of such factors. In other words, political subjectivities are over-privileged to the point of often largely eroding away the historical grounds from which they are produced. While the principal strength of Blanqui's politics resides in its forceful conception of revolutionary subjectivity, it should be aligned with more objective considerations without having its fundamental importance

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<sup>63</sup> Che Guevara, 'Guerrilla Warfare: A method', in *Che Guevara Reader: Writings on Politics and Revolution*, ed. David Deutschmann (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2004), p. 77.

diminished. As Marx asserts: ‘communism is at once *real* and directly bent towards *action*’.<sup>64</sup> Or as Peter Hallward has proposed more recently, the task is to work towards a ‘dialectical voluntarism’ that ‘in connecting both objective and subjective forms of determination, is oriented by the primacy of the latter.’<sup>65</sup> Overall, then, Blanqui’s intellectual insights can serve to supplement the limitations of others, just as its own internal flaws and shortcomings can be corrected from external sources.<sup>66</sup>

### **Forerunners, contemporaries, descendents**

Blanqui has not been sufficiently well known to claim explicit disciples and descendents, and what little that has been and remains known often does not go beyond a picture of an adventurist conspirator, commanding no followers as such. An aim of the present study is therefore to show that Blanqui’s politics, when properly understood, can claim more forerunners, implicit contemporary fellow travellers and descendents than we have hitherto been led to think. This will allow us to situate Blanqui within a wider political tradition, understanding and appreciating his position in a broader history. Some of the basic considerations behind this approach should be highlighted here.

As already noted, in many ways Rousseau stands as Blanqui’s clearest intellectual forerunner. Property and the origins of social inequality, the relativism of law, the necessity of enlightened leadership and popular education in the construction a new social body, the people as a national and political construction, an active

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<sup>64</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 349.

<sup>65</sup> Hallward, ‘The Will of the People’, p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> Münster suggests in a particularly measured manner that Blanqui is ‘un des leaders révolutionnaires les plus brillants, les plus perspicaces, les plus conséquents non seulement dans ses convictions, mais aussi dans ses erreurs’ (Münster, ‘Introduction’, in *Ecrits sur la Révolution*, p. 58).

general will as the basis of a truly free and equal society – on many crucial points Blanqui's position is extremely close to that of Rousseau.<sup>67</sup> Yet given their multiple political affinities, comparison of the two figures has been surprisingly absent, with many of Blanqui's readers focusing instead – and not without good reason – on the lineage from Babeuf through Buonarrotti or from the Hébertistes.<sup>68</sup> The manner in which Blanqui continues and develops Rousseau's project in the context of nineteenth-century France is therefore an important consideration.

It will have become apparent from this introduction that one figure looms larger over Blanqui than most, for to speak of nineteenth-century revolutionary politics is to enter into dialogue with Marx as a matter of course.<sup>69</sup> How, then, will the latter be addressed hereafter? Reference to and engagement with Marx will serve two primary functions. First, and quite simply, Marx's insights serve to increase our understanding of Blanqui, stimulating by virtue of its divergences and developments. The most fundamental demarcation is worth reiterating: Blanqui is not a Marxist. His commitment to radical equality, to communism, does not emanate from a critique of political economy or the dialectical-materialist conception of history. It does not follow, however, that my invocation of Marx or Marxism necessarily implies a 'correct' position or idea, as opposed to an 'incorrect' reading on the part of Blanqui, as is largely characteristic of Marxist-authored accounts of Blanqui. When and where such judgments of Blanqui's work do occur will be made explicit. Elsewhere, however – and this brings me to the second function of my use of Marx – I shall

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<sup>67</sup> Rousseau's work was indeed very familiar to Blanqui. 'Vous pouvez bien penser que j'ai lu Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Courier, La Fontaine, Don Quichotte', he once explained. 'Ce sont des livres qu'on sait à peu près par coeur' (Blanqui, 'T140', 8 July 1841, *OI*, p. 624). Blanqui would, however, later write of – and thus criticize – 'J.J. Rousseau, le Déiste' (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 75 [1869]). Blanqui likewise denounces Robespierre for his attempt, precisely in line with Rousseau's proposals for a civil religion, to create the Cult of the Supreme Being.

<sup>68</sup> Dommanget and Spitzer both only mention Rousseau once in passing in their respective studies of Blanqui's thought.

<sup>69</sup> On Blanqui and Marx, see Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d'Auguste Blanqui*, ch. 7.

attempt to show that in many respects Blanqui and Marx can in fact be read in conjunction and without contradiction. Against successive attempts to distance Marx ‘the scientist’ and Blanqui ‘the activist’, it is time to rethink the relationship between the two, with Marx’s early work but also his more emphatically political writings particularly around 1848 and the Paris Commune perhaps unsurprisingly providing the most fertile grounds for reappraisal.

Finally, in assessing Blanqui’s politics this thesis aims to engage with and speak to our *actualité*. Insofar as Blanqui’s politics incorporates some of the key concerns of contemporary political thought – notions of equality or communism; (re)defining the subject; voluntarism and political will – where possible it seems timely to bring together the two. For not only is Blanqui largely absent from current debates to which he can offer important contributions, but also these debates can grant us in turn a better understanding of Blanqui himself.

### **Blanqui in print**

New editions of some of Blanqui’s writings help in the task of analysing Blanqui’s politics. In fact there have been a surprising number of primary texts published relatively recently in French.<sup>70</sup> Dominique Le Nuz’s work is of particular significance in this respect. Building on the smaller, earlier anthologies edited by Volguine (1955), Abensour and Pelosse (1973, 2000), and Münster (1977) respectively, Le Nuz oversaw the publication of *Œuvres I: Des Origines à la révolution de 1848* (1993),

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<sup>70</sup> Auguste Blanqui, *L’Éternité par les astres*, preface Jacques Rancière (Paris: Les Impressions nouvelles, 2002); Auguste Blanqui, *Le communisme, avenir de la société*, preface Roger Martelli (Paris: Le Passager Clandestin, 2008); Auguste Blanqui, *Ni Dieu, Ni Maître*, preface Maurice Dommanget (Brussels: Editions Aden, 2009); Auguste Blanqui, *Instructions pour une prise d’armes*, préface Elsa Guillaud (Grenoble: Editions cent pages, 2009); Auguste Blanqui, *Critique Sociale: Fragments et Notes*, preface Gérald Dittmar and Éric Dussert (Paris: éditions Dittmar, 2012).

which offers a comprehensive collection of Blanqui's work from his early life until 1848, including major statements such as the *Défense du Citoyen Louis Auguste Blanqui* and the *Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple* (both 1832), the texts written during the short life of *Le Libérateur*, as well as hitherto unpublished personal correspondence. Some of these texts were reproduced in a later anthology, *Maintenant, il faut des armes* (2006), alongside key texts from the post-1848 period, including *Lettre à Maillard* (1852), *Instructions pour une prise d'armes* (1868), extracts from the *Critique Sociale* (1867-70) and *L'Éternité par les astres* (1872). Despite this important work, much of Blanqui's writings remain unpublished. Attempting a systematic reading thus requires consultation of the Blanqui manuscripts (Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 9578-9598), a disorderly collection of articles, speeches, notes, correspondence and newspaper clippings bound into some thirty volumes and housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

I describe the appearance of these anthologies as 'surprising' because, as yet, analysis in the form of secondary literature has not kept pace – far from it. Some important contributions have no doubt occurred. In French, the essays of Miguel Abensour and Valentin Pelosse have been republished.<sup>71</sup> The texts by Jacques Rancière and Daniel Bensaïd and Michael Löwy were also recently translated into English, to comprise, along with a further article by Peter Hallward, a dossier entitled 'Blanqui's Eternal Gap' that appeared in the journal *Radical Philosophy*.<sup>72</sup> These are encouraging developments. Nonetheless, the seeming appetite, in France at least, to

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<sup>71</sup> Miguel Abensour, *Les Passages Blanqui: Walter Benjamin entre mélancolie et révolution* (Paris: Sens&Tonka, 2013) (originally published in *Walter Benjamin et Paris*, ed. Heinz Wismann [Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1986]); Miguel Abensour and Valentin Pelosse, *Libérer l'Enfermé* (Paris: Sens&Tonka, 2014) (originally published as the postface of their edited anthology, *Auguste Blanqui, Instructions pour une prise d'armes, L'Éternité par les astres et autres textes*, eds. Miguel Abensour et Valentin Pelosse (Paris: Editions de la Tête de Feuille, 1973, which was itself also republished under the same title by Sens&Tonka in 2000). Hereafter I shall refer to the new editions.

<sup>72</sup> *Radical Philosophy*, 185 (May-June 2014). See above for full references of the three articles.

republish Blanqui's writings has not been accompanied by a re-engagement with their content in a sustained manner, and the general under-appreciation of Blanqui and his writings continues largely uncorrected, particularly in the Anglophone world where, aside from two translations of *L'Éternité par les astres* and the selection of translated texts on the Marxists Internet Archive, no anthology comparable to those in French exists.<sup>73</sup> One has to go back to Samuel Bernstein's *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection* (1971) for the last book-length treatment of the subject, though this volume, along with Spizter's before it, is now out of print. French secondary literature does not fare much better. Maurice Paz's *Un révolutionnaire professionnel, Auguste Blanqui* (1984), a curious volume that does not hold back in its criticisms but ultimately fails to offer any convincing new perspectives, remains the most recent monograph.

This, then, is the first monograph or doctoral thesis on Blanqui to appear in English for over forty years. As well as drawing on Blanqui's unpublished manuscripts, it is also the first such study, in either English or French, to make use of the material in the *Œuvres I* collection since its publication over twenty years ago as well as the more recent anthologies.

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 establishes the foundational role of thought, ideas and education in Blanqui's thought. Blanqui's entire project can only be understood in light of his basic assumptions regarding enlightened thought and the political consciousness it confers. Although Blanqui is no doubt correct to insist on enlightened thought, ideas and consciousness as vital factors in any political process, I suggest that he often overstates the division between knowledge and ignorance,

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<sup>73</sup> Auguste Blanqui, 'Eternity According to the Stars', *New Centennial Review*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 2009), pp. 3–60; Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*, trans. Frank Chouraqui (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2013); <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/blanqui/>>

thereby elevating the requisite level of intellectual consciousness to the point of rejecting ordinary people's capacity for collective action. It would nonetheless be wrong to suggest this as representative of Blanqui's thought as a whole, and the issue is in fact quite ambiguous, particularly when one compares Blanqui's early and late thought.

Having outlined the importance of enlightened thought, Chapter 2 considers Blanqui's conception of politics as making a choice and taking a side. I explore the manner in which Blanqui's analysis of property, the state and contemporary politics informs his view of politics as inherently and invariably conflictual, as a civil war. Together with his uncompromising insistence on the principled commitment to an ideal, this leads Blanqui to uphold a politics of partisan conviction. On this point Blanqui's thought is particularly instructive; he lucidly outlines an essential condition of any militant politics worthy of the name, then as now.

Chapter 3 explores perhaps the most significant consequence of the preceding chapter, namely a conception of the people or the proletariat which serves a politics of conflict and commitment. By contrast with the interpretations of previous analysts, I argue that for Blanqui the people or the proletariat is primarily a subjective, formal position; it both presupposes and articulates a political choice, a political principle. Hitherto the majority of Blanqui's readers have overlooked this crucial point, overlooking the political logic at work in the use of these terms.

At this point we will be able to begin to bring together some of the ideas discussed in the preceding chapters in order to attain a more complete picture of Blanqui's conception of politics.

Voluntarism is in many ways *the* unifying category of Blanqui's militant politics. Chapter 4 outlines the role of political will in Blanqui's understanding of

how a political process begins, how it continues when confronted by obstacles and resistance and the subjective resources these sequences demand. Many of Blanqui's insights on these issues remain crucial to any serious reflection on the question of popular empowerment, deserving as such far greater interest than previously accorded to them. Developing some of the initial observations outlined in chapter one, I then return to what seems to me as a major problem and limitation of Blanqui's politics: the over-privileging of enlightened consciousness as a precondition of volition. Insofar as those deemed unconscious and unenlightened are by extension incapable of genuine voluntary action, Blanqui displays a certain lack of confidence in the mass of the people as voluntary political actors, I suggest, as illustrated in the vital question of revolutionary transition.

Chapter 5 examines Blanqui's understanding of history and the possibility of human progress, reconstructing the relationship between philosophical and historical change. For Blanqui, history is the account of human thought and human activity. Humans therefore have the capacity, if not the duty and the obligation, to create their own history, to politically struggle for social progress. I also address the extent to which Blanqui nonetheless fails to take sufficient account of non-political, non-subjective factors that shape the context and circumstances of political and historical change.

Considering the anti-determinism that pervades Blanqui's thought, I show the extent to which all his writings, including - and contrary to the claims of Walter Benjamin's influential reading - *L'Éternité par les astres*, are rooted throughout in the insistence on political possibility over historical necessity.



## Chapter 1 – Thought, Ideas and Education

‘Les révolutions doivent être faites dans les esprits avant de s’accomplir dans la rue.’<sup>74</sup>

Blanqui establishes the foundational role of enlightened thought and consciousness within his project from his very first writings. A short text from 1831, for instance, suggests that while the university of the Middle Ages was like ‘une oasis de liberté, réservée à la civilisation, au milieu de ces déserts de barbarie et d’esclavage’ it had since become, particularly under Napoleon, an ‘instrument de despotisme’. Blanqui therefore demands the destruction of the ‘monopole le plus odieux et le plus funeste au pays ... celui qui tarit la civilisation dans sa source et qui est l’outrage le plus cruel infligé à l’intelligence humaine’. The anthropological and political assumptions behind this position are then clearly expressed: ‘Nous sommes las de cet exécration impôt qui frappe ce qu’il y a de plus saint et de plus sacré, ce qui fait l’homme et le citoyen : l’instruction.’<sup>75</sup> Although across his writings Blanqui often reflects on how material conditions and concerns (hunger, poverty) determine political choices and on the extent to which the coercive mechanisms of the state (the repression of popular revolts, Haussmann’s reconstruction of Paris during the Second Empire) are deployed to control and oppress the population, throughout his life he nonetheless maintains the basic belief expressed in 1831 that on the part of an unjust regime ‘il est plus facile de nous tromper que de nous abattre’.<sup>76</sup> Human thought and consciousness, for Blanqui, are ultimately determinant of socio-political arrangements. Education and the - politically decisive – thought and reason it alone confers thus form crucial

<sup>74</sup> Blanqui MSS 9582, fo. 75 [1 September 1852]; Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 368 [6 September 1852].

<sup>75</sup> Blanqui, ‘Déclaration du Comité provisoire des Ecoles’, 22 January 1831, *MA*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

components of Blanqui's system. Blanqui's voluntarism is conceived in the strictest terms as *conscious* volition. Political subjectivity presupposes intellectual consciousness. The collective consciousness of individuals is the essential precondition of both collective voluntary action and sustained, collective political power. The implications this has for Blanqui's wider project and for its reconsideration today remain, however, somewhat unexplored in recent engagements with his thought.<sup>77</sup>

In this first chapter, then, we must go to the heart of Blanqui's thought, establishing the role and meaning assigned to thought, knowledge and instruction, and the manner in which they underpin Blanqui's conception of politics. Although this will inevitably anticipate and touch on some subsequent discussions, particularly those of Chapters 4 and 5, through reconstructing this core element of Blanqui's thinking the chapter aims to provide a basis from which to later analyse in greater depth his project as a whole.

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<sup>77</sup> Of the three texts featured in the 'Blanqui's Eternal Gap' dossier in *Radical Philosophy*, for instance, Rancière ('The Radical Gap') sidesteps issues of intelligence and consciousness, perhaps unsurprisingly given that his own 'presumption of equality' is completely at odds with the basis of Blanqui's entire project. Bensaïd and Löwy ('Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist'), meanwhile, do acknowledge the question of enlightened intelligence and highlight the impasse it presents for Blanqui but do not pursue the issue further. Finally, although Hallward ('Blanqui's bifurcations') rightly places cognitive capacity at the core of Blanqui's conception of humanity and society, in outlining the 'three basic principles' of Blanqui's politics the intellectual consciousness presupposed in Blanqui's conception of political volition and of Paris as the country's leading revolutionary actor nonetheless remains largely absent.

## Revolution of the intellect

### *Blanqui's dualism*

Blanqui's thought is broadly underpinned by a dualism according to which nature and its governing laws are strictly separate from human thought, activity and volition.<sup>78</sup> A note from 1868 under the title 'La loi, mot inapplicable aux choses humaines' succinctly sets out the basic position upon which *L'Éternité par les astres* most notably would later expand. 'Le mot *loi* n'a de sens que dans la nature', writes Blanqui, in direct opposition to the 'utopian' socialism of Saint-Simon and Fourier and its conflation of natural and human laws. 'Qui dit loi, dit règle invariable, immanente, fatale, incompatible avec l'intelligence et la volonté.' There is no such thing as political, social or economic laws, for in the human realm there is only 'de caprice et d'arbitraire ... des expédients, phénomènes qui varient au gré des fantaisies et des passions humaines.'<sup>79</sup> Unlike nature, in the human realm there is no successive development and perpetual evolution; unlike nature, in the human realm all is contingent and undetermined, all is open to movement and change, to reason and volition.<sup>80</sup> So crucial is this dualism that elsewhere it is condensed and accorded Blanqui's characteristic aphoristic treatment:

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<sup>78</sup> Other readers to comment on Blanqui's dualism include Mason, 'Blanqui and Communism', p. 511, Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 41, and Hallward, 'Blanqui's bifurcations', p. 37.

<sup>79</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 278 [n.d.]; 9592(3), fo. 146 [27 April 1868]. Cf. Blanqui, 'L'Éternité par les astres', 1872, *MA*, pp. 370-71.

<sup>80</sup> As Blanqui explains at length in one note: 'Dans la nature, il n'y a point rapport de cause à effet, mais développement successif, évolution perpétuelle ... cause et effet sont là des mots vides de sens, car ils impliquent accident ou volonté, choses tout-à-fait étrangères aux phénomènes organiques, où elle n'interviennent qu'à titre de perturbation. Qu'un arbre meure debout ou tombe abattu, soit par le vent, soit par la hache, le résultat définitif reste le même. Les molécules constitutives de cet arbre retournent à la circulation générale, mais en suivant des voies différentes, déterminées alors par ce qu'on appelle une cause, simple incident toujours en dehors de l'évolution régulière elle-même. L'arbre tombé pourrit sur place, et ses principes entrent dans de nouvelles combinaisons. Si on l'a jeté bas pour un but d'utilité, ce n'est qu'une/cette destination n'est qu'éphémère. Le fagot brule, se réduit en gaz et en sols, matériaux disponibles pour une métamorphose subséquente. (La planche et la poutre), par un plus long circuit, la planche et la poutre arrivent néanmoins à la dissolution finale qui on dégage

Prétendue fatalité des lois économiques qui régissent la société. Pure impertinence. Rien de plus arbitraire et de plus irrégulier que la marche des choses humaines qui varient au gré de milliards de caprices. Rien de moins semblable à l'ordre immuable et fatal des choses de la nature.<sup>81</sup>

Blanqui's dualism excludes absolutely any conflation of man and nature, of human affairs and natural processes. After Rousseau, Blanqui conceives society as in no way conforming to any form of natural authority or historical tendency.<sup>82</sup> Humans are therefore not subject to the will of a *libre arbitre* or greater design; Blanqui unreservedly rejects any philosophical system in which, like under God, 'les hommes ne sont que les instruments aveugles/involontaires de ses desseins. Seul, il inspire tout, dirige tout, manipule tout.'<sup>83</sup> Conceptions of power or history within the human realm that appeal to any form of '*force aveugle et fatale*' are opposed in the strongest possible terms.<sup>84</sup> For Blanqui, by contrast, any given established social order is, by definition, in no way unconsciously or inevitably arrived at but, rather, consciously forged and organised in accordance with its dominant ideals and interests. (These issues will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 5.) How, then, are we to understand the open and contingent realm of mankind with its constituent battle of wills, interests and ideas as distinct from the immutable realm of nature and natural laws? How, by extension, does this inform Blanqui's conception of political action and social change?

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les éléments divers et les restitue à la loi des transformations successives. Toute l'activité humaine tourne dans ce cercle misérable' (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 49 [17 April 1868]).

<sup>81</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 274 [n.d.].

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Christopher Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Book I, Chapters i-iv.

<sup>83</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 181 [n.d.].

<sup>84</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 50 [17 April 1868]; emphasis in original.

*Man is thought*

‘La pensée, c’est l’homme’, Blanqui affirms.<sup>85</sup> Mankind is, for Blanqui, defined first and foremost by its cerebral, not manual, capacities. The physical capacity and manual dexterity to build and craft is, to be sure, shared by man and animals alike. Blanqui notes how the masterly skill, geometric precision and exacting calculations of birds’ nests, bees’ honeycomb and spiders’ webs emulate if not surpass man’s ability to manipulate material. But thought and ideas alone are what make mankind.<sup>86</sup> At a social level Blanqui takes this point of departure to its logical conclusion, in a move that has profound implications for his conception of politics as a whole. ‘C’est la Philosophie qui gouverne le monde. ... Aucune société n’a vécu sur la terre, sans être régie par une Philosophie.’<sup>87</sup> Social change occurs, then, through philosophical change. In direct contrast to the basic tenets of Marxism, Blanqui believes that the ‘vie du peuple n’est pas dans les œuvres de ses mains ; elle est dans sa pensée. La vie intellectuelle et morale est tout ; la vie matérielle une simple dépendance et un reflet.’<sup>88</sup> Rather than anticipating or following Marx’s inversion of Hegel, Blanqui maintains with the latter the primacy of ideas and consciousness as determining material socio-economic and political reality, and not vice versa. Ideas and thought, Blanqui contends, condition political institutions, economic relations and the overall social existence of man.

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<sup>85</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 284 [16 April 1868]. See also: ‘Le cerveau seul fait l’homme, sa dignité, sa grandeur. Il est l’organe roi, siège et source de l’intelligence’ (Blanqui, ‘Athéisme et spiritualisme’, 13 December 1880, *NDNM*, pp. 23-24).

<sup>86</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, 1869-70, *CSI*, pp. 214-215.

<sup>87</sup> Blanqui adds: ‘Toutes les autres sciences n’interviennent dans la direction sociale qu’en modifiant on réformer la Philosophie. ... C’est la différence des Philosophies qui fait la différence des organisations sociales’ (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 384 [n.d.]).

<sup>88</sup> Blanqui MSS 9586, fo 402 [n.d.]. See also Blanqui, ‘Candide’, 3 May 1865, *MA*, p. 248. On the comparison with Marx’s assumption that ‘[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness’, see also Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 46.

With these assumptions we begin to uncover some of the fundamental limitations of Blanqui's thinking. Insofar as humanity and society are defined by their cognitive capacities and collective consciousness, the failure therein to adequately account for the material conditions, productive forces and social relations that underpin the established order will prevent Blanqui from fully comprehending the objective realities that, while not ultimately determinant, certainly shape the processes and circumstances of political action and social transformation. It will leave Blanqui unable to explain historical change outside the realm of ideas, unable to formulate a militant political project properly grounded in specific historical conditions. 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please' Marx was right to assert; 'they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances existing already'.<sup>89</sup> Although, as we shall see in the following chapters, Blanqui's essential strength indeed lies in his account of how men make their own history, not least thanks to the absence of a form of historical determinism that appears in some of Marx's own writings, his major shortcoming nonetheless remains the failure to sufficiently analyse, explain and consider the existing historical conditions through which this activity takes place.

### *Instruction, transformation, volition*

Within Blanqui's dualism human thought and the mind are, however, far from immaterial in any form of spiritualist sense (spiritualism is of course for Blanqui, after 'les athées du 18<sup>ème</sup> siècle, Diderot, Helvétius, d'Holbach, Lamettrie [*sic*]', the target of his atheist materialism).<sup>90</sup> Reflecting on the relationship between thought and matter, Blanqui reasons that thought is itself a product of matter: the brain. Human

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<sup>89</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 329; translation modified.

<sup>90</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 75 [1869].

thought is ‘une fonction de la substance nerveuse’, Blanqui writes. This leads him to dismiss as ‘[une] hypothèse ridicule’ the suggestion that human intelligence ‘pourrait exister en dehors de la matière, une intelligence infinie’ creating the material world; it disproves ‘la toute-puissance d’une intelligence divine’<sup>91</sup> and the belief in ‘un être chimérique ... indépendant de la substance nerveuse’.<sup>92</sup> Thought, as produced by the material organism of the brain, ‘n’existe que par la matière, ne se manifeste que par la matière, ne se conserve que par la matière’, Blanqui emphatically insists.<sup>93</sup>

To this Blanqui importantly adds that thought’s material source, the brain, can in fact also be developed and perfected by thought itself.<sup>94</sup> Humans have the capacity to actively develop the brain through the practice of thinking. ‘Agir par l’instruction sur les centres nerveux, désarmer les penchants mauvais, développer et accentuer les bons, obtenir ainsi un homme renouvelé par la transformation de son organisme, une telle méthode réunit à la fois la prudence et l’efficacité’<sup>95</sup> The political implication Blanqui derives from the basic assumption that it is ‘[l’]idée seule qui fait l’homme’ is thus significant: ‘L’instrument de la délivrance n’est point le bras, mais le cerveau, et le cerveau ne vit que par instruction.’<sup>96</sup> Therein resides the fundamental process by which humanity can advance and progress, creating and shaping its own history by means of the conscious political subjectivity produced by intellectual development. While Blanqui, as we have seen, defines humanity primarily by its capacity for thought, he equally maintains that humanity’s capacity to change, to be perfected, is

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<sup>91</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 53 [15 April 1868].

<sup>92</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 267 [n.d.].

<sup>93</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 287 [n.d.].

<sup>94</sup> ‘L’homme tient de la matière un cerveau perfectible par la réaction de la pensée’ (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 267 [n.d.]).

<sup>95</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 217 [n.d.].

<sup>96</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, pp. 214-215. In 1880 Blanqui offered a striking restatement of this basic primacy of enlightened thought and ideas within emancipatory politics: ‘Rien ... n’égale cette pensée claire et profonde du matin qui sent s’élargir indéfiniment sa puissance et s’empare victorieusement de l’espace. Toutes les barrières tombent, toutes les obscurités se dissipent devant la lucidité pénétrante et ce déploiement de force ne fait que donner à l’organe une nouvelle énergie’ (Blanqui, ‘Athéisme et spiritualisme’, *NDNM*, p. 24).

its foremost quality, and the progress of humanity can indeed only occur through the change in humans themselves.<sup>97</sup> Working directly from the Enlightenment tradition of the perfectibility of man, Blanqui contends that enlightened thinking itself conceives and communicates the ideas and morals capable of bringing about social change and progress.<sup>98</sup> All humans must therefore devote their lives to developing and expanding their intellect and critical faculties.<sup>99</sup> Blanqui often appears to present this as the realisation of humanity's true essence. Thought and the consciousness it confers constitute the defining characteristics of humanity, comprising the – otherwise uncultivated or repressed – essence of man as cognitive, rational, empowered and unmanipulated, and providing it with the capacity for its own transformation and progress.<sup>100</sup> To insist on the existing state of humanity, its current thought and morality, to dismiss not only the possibility but the necessity of humanity's further progress, is nothing other than a justification of the status quo in all its injustice, inequality and irrationality. Humans beings' dynamism and capacity for transformation are thus fundamental in the realisation of principled social change.<sup>101</sup> Again, we might note that unlike classical Marxism Blanqui's conception of consciousness and the political subjectivity it confers does not arise from the conditions inflicted upon the working class in the process of capitalist development –

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<sup>97</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1) fo. 262 [25 August 1868].

<sup>98</sup> See, for example, Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', 2 February 1834, *MA*, pp. 111-112. In this text Blanqui claims that human intelligence discovered the principle of equality, this 'révélation sublime' and 'effort sublime de l'intelligence humaine' (ibid., pp. 110, 113).

<sup>99</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 156 [8 March 1869].

<sup>100</sup> Blanqui wrote in 1834 that enlightened thought and work are the exclusive 'sources de la richesse sociale'; 'l'âme et la vie de l'humanité', together forming the banner of equality, contrasted with 'oisiveté et exploitation' of privilege. With thought and work society breathes, grows and progresses; without them society is doomed to collapse, disintegration and death. Thought and work represent 'l'homme exalté par la pensée, ennobli par l'exercice de sa puissance, l'homme dominant en maître toute la création'; idleness, meanwhile, stands for 'l'homme inerte, n'exerçant plus ses facultés, dégradé jusqu'à l'état de brute, l'homme enfin cessant d'être homme !' (Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, pp. 111-112, 115-116; Blanqui, 'Qui fait la soupe doit la manger', March 1834, *OI*, p. 291).

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, the note entitled 'La mobilité, Force principale de la France', which states: 'Changer par intérêt personnel est d'un coquin. Changer par conviction est d'un honnête homme et d'un sage' (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 227 [n.d.]).



even an ‘advanced’ worker can remain ‘une dupe aveugle’<sup>102</sup> - but from enlightened instruction and thought alone. And again here we anticipate some of the basic ambiguities and tensions of Blanqui’s project. Who is and who is not capable of emancipatory action? How and when is this capacity realised? What is the possibility of *self*-emancipation? To these questions we shall return.

For Blanqui the inherent power of enlightened reason can only be realised in service of the oppressed multitude. As he already insisted in 1834: ‘l’intelligence ... n’a de puissance réelle qu’à la condition d’être morale, c’est-à-dire utile aux masses’. Human intellect, Blanqui continues, ‘dans sa plus haute expression, ne peut pas être égoïste, car elle n’aperçoit de tendance salubre que celle qui mène à l’égalité’.<sup>103</sup> Enlightened thinking is bound first and foremost to egalitarianism and the protection of the weak and vulnerable. ‘La pensée’, Blanqui repeats, ‘agit en faveur de la faiblesse.’<sup>104</sup> But as this last statement makes clear, only through its practical intervention within the material world, through its actual exercise, can this principled philosophical engagement become politically decisive, as indeed it must. ‘Dès que la pensée, en se déclarant immatérielle, cesse de s’appuyer sur sa mère,’ Blanqui warns on the other hand, ‘elle perd pied et se perd dans le vide’. Only in remaining firmly linked to materialism and material concerns, the ‘source qui seule alimente’,<sup>105</sup> could thought fulfil its preeminent role: for humanity to make its own history.

In more practical terms how, then, can human thought serve human action as the basis of human emancipation? ‘Il s’agit de savoir’, Blanqui claims, ‘si les actions

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<sup>102</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 214.

<sup>103</sup> Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, 2 February 1834, *MA*, pp. 112-113. Cf. Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 212.

<sup>104</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 251-252 [n.d.].

<sup>105</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 266-267 [n.d.]. ‘The exercise of actual thinking,’ Hallward resumes, ‘is both a material, cerebral process and a socialized capacity that can be more or less educated or trained, and thus more or less stifled by repression and ideological manipulation’ (‘Blanqui’s bifurcations’, p. 37).

de l'homme dépendent de son organisme ou de sa volonté et si la volonté n'est pas elle-même un résultat de l'organisme.'<sup>106</sup> Human volition is produced and conditioned by human knowledge. Just as every effect has a cause, every will has a 'motif'. Blanqui's dualism and his privileging of humanity's cognitive capacities thus open the door to his principled voluntarism. 'La volonté est un produit de la substance nerveuse, et elle est déterminée par des motifs qui sont une émanation d'autres éléments nerveux';<sup>107</sup> 'à toute minute de la vie,' Blanqui reaffirms, 'ce qu'on appelle volonté est la manifestation externe de l'encéphale en activité.'<sup>108</sup> For Blanqui thought precedes volition. What we think and know determines what we do; our action within any situation is subject to our understanding of it. Were it otherwise, Blanqui reasons, in any given circumstance 'toutes les manières de sentir, de juger, de vouloir' would be identical for every person, which is of course anything but true.<sup>109</sup> But by equal measure Blanqui seems to resist any form of pure rationalism. In one note the empiricist credo of Locke, *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu* (nothing in the intellect which was not first in the senses) as well as Leibnitz's rationalist amendment, *nisi intellectus ipse* (except intelligence itself), are dismissed as nonsense. Like Kant, Blanqui's epistemology appears to argue that human reason, the capacity to construct and organise knowledge, begins through and is dependent on experience and sensation. '*L'intellectus*, l'entendement, la faculté de penser', Blanqui speculates, 'réside dans la substance grise et n'est mise en action que par les sensations venues de l'extérieur. Sans l'intermédiaire des sens, point de faculté de penser, point d'intellectus.'<sup>110</sup> Just as humans' cognitive capacities condition and shape knowledge and intellect, the knowledge and intellect that stimulate and form

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<sup>106</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 177 [22 June 1868].

<sup>107</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 220 [n.d.].

<sup>108</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 78 [1869].

<sup>109</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 220 [n.d.].

<sup>110</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 229 [July 1868].

the content of the mind come solely from experience and the senses, from the phenomenal realm as Kant would say. ‘Le matérialisme procède par la méthode expérimentale et non par des hypothèses a priori’, Blanqui accordingly affirms.<sup>111</sup> It follows from this insistence on the materiality of the brain, on the actively willed development towards intellectual enlightenment in both man and society, that Blanqui renounces any utopian aspect to his conception of communism as an *a priori* hypothesis imposed upon a people.<sup>112</sup>

These speculations regarding free will have profound implications for Blanqui’s entire political project. Indeed, it is in these claims that we discover the primary movement from thought to practice, from knowledge to action, from consciousness to volition that underpins his most basic political assumptions thereafter. We might note that here Rousseau anticipates many of Blanqui’s concerns. Rousseau assumes that ‘in order to will, it is necessary to be free’, and that true freedom is the freedom to consciously think and decide for oneself as an enlightened and informed individual. This ‘confluence of enlightenment and good will’ must then be collectively exercised in order ‘to achieve success’.<sup>113</sup> ‘Every free act has two causes,’ *The Social Contract* summarises, ‘which cooperate in order to produce it. The one, which is moral, is the will that decides on the act, and the other, which is physical, is the force that carries it out.’<sup>114</sup> Blanqui shares Rousseau’s highly moralistic conception of politics. ‘Notre champ d’action, notre activité à nous,’ Blanqui explains, ‘est d’ordre moral. La pensée est toute d’ordre moral.’<sup>115</sup> A moral imperative must therefore underpin all cerebral activity as it does all social

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<sup>111</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 217 [n.d.].

<sup>112</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, pp. 189-190, 198-201.

<sup>113</sup> Rousseau, ‘Discourse on Political Economy’, in *The Social Contract*, p. 10; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Franklin Philip (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 16.

<sup>114</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 91.

<sup>115</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 251 [n.d.]. See also Blanqui MSS, 9592(3), fo. 253 [n.d.].

arrangements.<sup>116</sup> Blanqui indeed places great emphasis on the intellectual prerequisite for voluntary action. '[I]ntelligence', as the *Critique Sociale* declares in no uncertain terms, is the 'source première de toute activité.'<sup>117</sup> For Blanqui only the truly enlightened consciousness of reasoned cognition can produce genuine free will. For Blanqui as for Rousseau, 'no man has a natural authority over his fellow' and 'strength does not confer any right'. 'Let us agree then', Rousseau suggests, 'that might is not right, and that we are obliged to obey only legitimate powers.'<sup>118</sup> Blanqui agrees: only genuine free will, that is to say a resolutely *moral* act of principled conviction, can be considered politically legitimate, to be obeyed as such. Blanqui therefore decries the belief that existing laws or an established power should be respected by mere virtue of their present existence and establishment.<sup>119</sup> When it comes to the law - a notion which, when applied to the human realm, is neither an inevitable nor immutable norm but only ever 'l'expression de la volonté du plus fort' - it is 'possible', Blanqui states, that the will it expresses may occasionally 'conforme au droit et à la justice. Tant mieux alors,' he adds, 'mais ce n'est là qu'un hasard heureux. Du jour au lendemain la volonté peut devenir la formule de l'iniquité et de la violence.'<sup>120</sup> Blanqui takes the practical consequences of this criterion of free will to the end, without equivocation. 'De quoi droit faire violence à leur opinion, leur volonté ?', he writes of his adversaries and their (unconscious) agents. 'Parce que leur opinion est sans base, leur volonté sans lumière. Parce que leur opinion et volonté ne

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<sup>116</sup> As one note makes clear: 'Point de société sans morale, point de morale sans philosophie. Sans philosophie, point de morale, et sans morale, point de société. Sans morale point de société, et sans philosophie point de morale' (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 155 [n.d.]).

<sup>117</sup> Blanqui, 'Projet de discours', August 1867, *CSII*, p. 153.

<sup>118</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 49.

<sup>119</sup> History 'est pleine de lois (aussi) exécrables comme leurs auteurs', Blanqui writes. 'Ceux qui les détruits sont considérés comme des bienfaiteurs de l'humanité.' The same inconsistency applies to the reverence for established power: 'il faut respecter la force tant qu'elle est la force, et punir le lendemain comme violence (ce qu'on adorais comme la force la veille) le lendemain du jour où elle ne l'est plus' (Blanqui MSS 9586, fo. 402-403 [n.d.]. Cf. Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, pp. 107-108).

<sup>120</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 278 [n.d.].

sont point l'expression/le résultat d'un choix libre mais le produit (le résultat) de la contrainte et de la fraude.'<sup>121</sup> Involuntary action or unconscious volition certainly can be exercised, Blanqui maintains. Between involuntary, unconscious will and voluntary, conscious will, then, lies justice. Many divergent opinions can find expression; anyone can be forced to will a course of action. But not all opinions and actions are, for Blanqui, the product of *conscious* volition, strictly understood, and are not of equal legitimacy as such. The principle of justice, as developed through rational cognition, is the sole gauge of truly free political action and of truly free socio-political arrangements in turn. Justice, in short, is 'le seul critérium vrai dans l'application des choses humaines.'<sup>122</sup>

Blanqui's work can be read as a sustained reflection on what it means to be a conscious human capable of reasoned thought and, therefore, of voluntary action. Just as Rousseau recognises the fundamental link between volition and freedom, such that 'if my will can be constrained I am no longer free',<sup>123</sup> Blanqui sees this capacity for conscious volition as the primary characteristic of free human beings. Those who remain the captive, unconscious agents of ignorance, those who are deliberately prevented from exercising their capacity for thought, and by extension their capacity for collective volition, are thus deprived of their very humanity. 'L'ignorant est à peine un homme,' Blanqui suggests with striking frankness, 'et on peut le mener comme un cheval, avec la bride et l'éperon.'<sup>124</sup> Rather than a form of contempt for the masses, these lines serve as an indictment of the oppressive social order directly

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<sup>121</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 307 [n.d.].

<sup>122</sup> Blanqui, 'L'économie politique sans morale', March 1870, *CSII*, p. 58.

<sup>123</sup> Rousseau, 'Discourse on Political Economy', p. 10. The *Discourse on Inequality* similarly asserts: 'since freedom is the noblest of man's faculties, we degrade our nature by lowering ourselves to the level of beasts enslaved by instinct ... . By giving up freedom, a man debases his being' (Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, pp. 74-75).

<sup>124</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, p. 217. See also Blanqui, 'Les articles 415 et 416 contre les coalitions', 1849, *CSII*, p. 177.

responsible for this deplorable state of affairs. In the eyes of the oppressor, to be sure, '[I]gnorance et la docilité du cheval, tel est l'idéal que leur égoïsme rêve pour l'ouvrier.'<sup>125</sup> This is precisely why, in the case of the Church, it wages 'une guerre implacable au dévouement, à l'intelligence, à tout ce qui est grand et généreux dans l'homme. Ses favoris ont toujours été la bassesse, le crétinisme, la dégradation ; ni cœur, ni tête, ni esprit, telle est pour elle la perfection.'<sup>126</sup> The suppression of the human capacity for conscious volition is therefore, in Blanqui's eyes, the most contemptible of acts. Any attempt to curtail instruction, and therefore the development of the people's thought, knowledge and cognitive faculties, is no less than 'une déclaration de guerre à l'espèce humaine.'<sup>127</sup>

The young Marx affirms that isolation from the *political* community is not the worker's worst affliction. 'The community from which *his own labour* separates him is *life* itself, physical and spiritual life, human morality, human activity, human enjoyment, human *nature*.'<sup>128</sup> Replacing the causal factor of labour with ignorance, a move which serves to highlight a key distinction in the priorities of the two thinkers, Blanqui nonetheless likewise sees the worker's prescribed role or position of the passive ignoramus as separating him from his human nature as a conscious social being. And just as the young Marx goes on to affirm that '[h]uman nature is the true community of men',<sup>129</sup> Blanqui envisages a social community as the full realisation of humanity through the exercise of its natural capacity to consciously will. 'L'homme de la communauté,' the *Critique Sociale* asserts, 'c'est celui qu'on ne trompe, ni ne

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<sup>125</sup> Blanqui, 'Les articles 415 et 416 contre les coalitions', *CSII*, p. 177. Cf. '[L]idéal du prolétaire, pour la religion catholique, c'est la crétin' (Blanqui, 'L'idéal du prolétaire pour le catholicisme', April 1867, *NDNM*, p. 48).

<sup>126</sup> Blanqui, 'Malfaisance de l'Église', April-May 1865, *NDNM*, p. 61.

<sup>127</sup> Blanqui MSS 9581, fo. 93 [n.d.]. See also: 'Les plus mortels ennemis de l'humanité sont ceux qui entravent l'instruction' (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 137 [25 June 1868]).

<sup>128</sup> Marx, 'Critical Notes on "The King of Prussia and Social Reform"', *Early Writings*, p. 418; emphasis in original.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 418-419; emphasis in original.

mène.’<sup>130</sup> Since mankind is thought, it is only through the development and exercise of this unique cognitive capacity that humanity can truly realise itself. For Marx and for Blanqui alike, political struggle, in this sense, forms part of and is ultimately driven by a much more fundamental social struggle, a social revolution, to realise the true essence of man both individually and collectively. In Blanqui’s eyes the exercise of conscious volition is what distinguishes an actor from an instrument, a human from an animal or automaton. And with this an emphatically humanist philosophy begins to emerge: progress and change are only ever realised through the voluntary actions of humanity; humanity is only truly realised through its own voluntary action for progress and change.

#### *The individual and the collective*

The enlightened individual at the heart of Blanqui’s thought forms the point of departure for his conception of collective interests and collective volition. Conscious volition is the essential natural capacity of every individual human, but the extent to which this capacity can be exercised as *collective* political activity still remains tied to the consciously willing individual. The cognitive capacity of the individual leads to humanity as a collective. ‘Le cerveau, c’est ... l’unité dans la multiplicité.’<sup>131</sup> Since cerebral activity is above all the shared capacity of all humans, to be truly harnessed it must be practically exercised as such. Writing about ‘la pensée’ and human beings, Blanqui asserts: ‘C’est par elle ils communiquent, par elles ils ne font qu’un seul être. Par elle s’établit la solidarité universelle. Par elle, l’intérêt d’un seul devient l’intérêt de tous, et cet intérêt de tous se résume dans l’intérêt du plus faible.’<sup>132</sup> With thought

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<sup>130</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 178. On this point see also *ibid.* pp. 191-192.

<sup>131</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 220 [n.d.].

<sup>132</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 267 [n.d.].

humans are unified and powerful, with ignorance they are isolated and weak.<sup>133</sup> However determined and tenacious, in the struggle against the rich and powerful, with all the power and resources at their disposal, individual volition will inevitably spell failure. In order to prevail, humanity ‘repose sur l’association’.<sup>134</sup> In this sense, only can the full capacities of the individual be realised, but also protected and defended, when actively forming part of a greater whole, of a collective political project formed on the basis of egalitarian solidarity.<sup>135</sup> Individual conscious volition, in other words, can only be politically actualized as collective conscious volition.

Blanqui is nonetheless equally clear that the prioritisation of collective agency and interests is not at the expense of the individual as a conscious and voluntary actor – far from it. Both in fact have to be thought simultaneously, such that many isolated individuals come together as equals to form one unified and organised collective body *of* enlightened individuals. ‘Avec l’instruction individuelle, tout. Sans elle, rien. Le soleil ou les ténèbres, la vie ou la mort.’<sup>136</sup> Everyone thus has a ‘double vie’, of the individual and of the collective, from which emerges a ‘double instinct’, that of ‘conservation personnelle’ and ‘conservation sociale’, the first being the more basic and constant, the second being weaker and more open to change and variation according to the wider level of enlightenment.<sup>137</sup> In the face of oppression and domination, just as without collective solidarity the individual is doomed to

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<sup>133</sup> Or as Blanqui writes elsewhere in a highly Rousseauist register: ‘le but des sociétés est précisément d’effacer les conséquences de ces inégalités individuelles, de placer toutes les faiblesses sous la protection de la force commune, supérieure aux forces isolées et abusives’ (Blanqui, ‘Rapport gigantesque de Thiers sur l’assistance publique’, 1850, *CSII*, p. 247. See also Blanqui, ‘Propriété intellectuelle’, 1867, *CSII*, p. 46). Cf. Rousseau, ‘Discourse on Political Economy’, p. 21.

<sup>134</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 265 [n.d.]. Cf. ‘Se serrer les uns contre les autres par l’association, c’est la ressource des hommes. L’isolement est le propre de la force, le faisceau, le recours de la faiblesse. La solidarité, le progrès, le perfectionnement par l’association, non par l’individu. Il briserait et serait brisé’ (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 268 [n.d.]).

<sup>135</sup> ‘Le perfectionnement et la grandeur de la race est liée par l’association au perfectionnement des individus’ (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 163, 265 [n.d.]).

<sup>136</sup> Blanqui, ‘Les sectes et la révolution’, October 1866, *CSII*, p. 116.

<sup>137</sup> Blanqui, ‘Candide’, *MA*, p. 248.



impotence, isolation and defeat, without the conscious volition of the individual the conscious volition of the people as the association of these individuals is by its very nature impossible, their collective force non-existent, their political failure inevitable.

### **The politics of (mis)education**

The assertion of human thought as constituent of humanity's capacity for its own progress is therefore crucial to Blanqui's broader conception of society and politics. Instruction is accordingly advanced as the essential tool of social progress, mis-education as that of domination and subjugation:

L'instruction est le seul agent de délivrance et d'organisation sociale. C'est l'intelligence qui gouverne le monde et c'est l'instruction qui donne l'intelligence. Privilège du petit nombre, elle amène l'oppression monarchique ou féodale. Apanage de tous, elle seule pourra créer par l'Egalité, l'ordre, la paix, la liberté, le bonheur. Elle est donc le premier besoin, la première conquête à poursuivre.<sup>138</sup>

Education – the 'unique instrument de salut', 'le seul agent du progrès', the 'unique agent du progrès humain'<sup>139</sup> - at both an individual and collective level can therefore be seen as a practical response to the problem posed by the privileging of thought and ideas as determinate of social relations and social change. Reason through instruction is the decisive weapon in the struggle for justice and equality. By the same token, however, ignorance through mis-education forms a, if not *the*, key tool in the

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<sup>138</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 64 [1869]. See also Blanqui MSS 9581, fo. 92-93 [n.d.].

<sup>139</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 107 [28 April 1870]; 9590(1), fo. 64 [n.d.]; 9590(1), fo. 193 [19 Avril 1869].

continued existence of all forms of unjust social order, according to Blanqui. Let us pursue this point further, particularly in its practical political implications.

*Enlightenment as emancipation*

Emancipation, Blanqui maintains throughout his writings, is the product of enlightenment, not vice versa; an enlightened society is the precondition of an emancipated society. The primacy ascribed to the idea as determinant of social relations and political change leads to a causal chain between enlightenment, association and communism, as one of many unrevised notes reveals:

Le communisme n'est que le terme (final) dernier de l'association ...  
L'association grandit/elle germe, s'étend uniquement par la lumière. Chaque pas dans cette voie est la conséquence d'un progrès dans l'instruction. Toute victoire de l'ignorance, au contraire, est une atteinte à l'association. ... Le communisme ne pourra se réaliser que par le triomphe absolu des lumières. Il en sera la suite intellectuelle, l'expression sociale et politique.<sup>140</sup>

The central, decisive conflict between enlightenment and ignorance, and its manifestation as a political struggle of emancipatory education over reactionary manipulation, becomes clear. (This is one of the essential messages of the *Critique Sociale*.) After the revolutionary seizure of power, community and instruction must advance hand in hand so as to avoid the re-emergence of the duplicitous manipulators of the people, this work coming to fruition only when, 'grâce à l'universalité des lumières, pas un seul homme ne pourra être la dupe d'un autre. Ce jour-là, nul ne

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<sup>140</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 59 [15 March 1869].

voudra souffrir l'inégalité de fortune.'<sup>141</sup> Addressing the objection that equality of education would not lead to equality of intellect, while conceding that such a didactic process may not redress 'l'inégalité des cerveaux' and that the risk of 'une hiérarchie intellectuelle' would remain, Blanqui nonetheless maintains that even 'chez le plus pauvre cerveau' a comprehensive education would be sufficient to bring about the necessary universal level of critical 'jugement' – described as '[l]a plus utile des facultés humaines, la faculté protectrice par excellence' - that will guard against the manipulation and deceit from which injustice and oppression arise.<sup>142</sup>

It follows that the foremost barriers to communism are, for Blanqui, the duplicitous institutions (religion, principally Christianity and the Catholic Church) and the mechanisms of the status quo (namely work, hunger, repression of revolt and the press) which either serve to bind the masses into ignorance and prevent enlightened public instruction or indeed actively misinform and mislead the people as the precondition of maintaining their power. Religion in particular, as Blanqui affirms in his numerous anticlerical polemics, structurally maintains popular ignorance, thereby causing continued social injustice. Religion, as the foremost intellectual and institutional propagator of unenlightened, reactionary thought, and with it exploitation and impoverishment, comprises 'la pierre angulaire de l'oppression, l'instrument par excellence de la tyrannie.'<sup>143</sup> And as the Inquisition and Saint Bartholomew massacres had shown, Blanqui adds, religion would ultimately not shirk from violence where necessary in the enforcement of its doctrines. Moreover, Blanqui

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<sup>141</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSJ*, pp. 184-187.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186.

<sup>143</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 74 [8 October 1869]. Blanqui succinctly explains elsewhere: 'La source du progrès est dans la communication de la pensée. Donc, le mal est tout a ce qui s'oppose à cette communication, le bien tout ce qui la favorise et la multiplie. (A ce titre, la plus grand bienfait pour l'humanité est la découverte de l'imprimerie, et le plus grand cruel fléau, le Christianisme.)' (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 58 [8 April 1869]). On the conflict between the printing press and Christianity, see also Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 157 [n.d.].

describes how the uneducated masses' insufferable daily lives and their work – upon which they are dependent in order simply to survive - provide no opportunities for intellectual emancipation.<sup>144</sup> The brutal realities of starvation and the violent repression of revolt can certainly teach the 'hommes simples' their true enemy, the real cause of their suffering.<sup>145</sup> But such clear manifestations of the struggle between rich and poor are ephemeral, such revelations extraordinary and often localised when compared to the masses as a whole.<sup>146</sup> The problem therefore remains that the majority of the poor still misunderstand the source of 'leurs maux'; 'un peuple dans les fers est dégradé par la servitude à ce point de ne pas avoir conscience de son abjection'.<sup>147</sup> Recall Blanqui's assumption that thought precedes and determines volition. Unable to understand their plight and to recognise their oppressor the masses are passively complicit to a duplicitous, and therefore exploitative, social order of inequality on which their own servitude is dependent.<sup>148</sup> In other words, for Blanqui the masses' intellectual poverty perpetuates their material poverty. Poverty certainly perpetuates ignorance, but ignorance is the primary cause of poverty. The people lack the enlightened political consciousness necessary to recognise their exploitation and

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<sup>144</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', 2 February 1834, *MA*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>146</sup> In Lyon, Blanqui argues, the masses only rose up with the necessary 'imposante unanimité' because the state of conflict between privilege and equality was so 'manifeste' that it was impossible for even the most 'stupides' to clearly see who were the victims and the aggressors. See *ibid.*, pp. 120, 122.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120; Blanqui MSS 9584(2), fo. 158 [n.d.]. In this respect Blanqui's balance sheet of the political failings of 1848, of the non-realisation of the possibilities it carried, is particularly insightful. 'La chute du drapeau rouge le 26 février 1848, résultat de l'ignorance populaire', Blanqui bluntly concludes. 'Son éducation populaire était nulle. La presse avait laissé le peuple dans des ténèbres. Point d'idées de fond.' This abandonment of the red flag of the people, Blanqui continues, was a backward step from the wave of struggles since 1830. All the republican insurrections against Louis-Philippe (June 1832, April 1834, May 1839) were fought 'sous le drapeau rouge contre le drapeau tricolore', comprising as such the 'précurseurs', the 'prologues', the 'premiers actes' of February 1848. Yet when considering the downward spiral of the popular movement from March 1848 to the plebiscite of November 1852 by which the Empire was re-established, Blanqui is clear as to its origins and consequences: 'Le peuple est myope, pour ne pas dire aveugle, ou plutôt il ne lit ni de loin, ni de près, parce qu'il ne sait pas lire. Il a vu tomber son drapeau avec la plus parfaite indifférence, sans comprendre le premier mot de ce drame. Chose étrange dans les masses, si ombrageuses d'ordinaire, si susceptibles, si impressionnables ... Chose explicable cependant par l'absence d'éducation politique' (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 153-155 [6 March 1869]).

<sup>148</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, p. 121.

so to resolve to end it. ‘Reconnaître sa misère, c’est sentir le besoin et avoir la volonté d’en sortir.’<sup>149</sup> In turn, and by an arrestingly simple inversion, Blanqui believes that to overcome ignorance is to overcome oppression and exploitation. Indeed, it seems logical to Blanqui, though to others cannot but appear analytically facile, that with the attainment of absolute enlightenment and the reign of reason and common sense all economic problems will be resolved.<sup>150</sup>

### *A war of words*

‘Il est fâcheux que l’idée philosophique ne pénètre pas dans les masses’, Blanqui confessed in 1866. ‘Elles ne deviendront sérieusement révolutionnaires que par l’athéisme.’<sup>151</sup> How could this problem be resolved? How could a vanguard – a minority upholding and attempting to advance a principled conviction – overcome its own isolated and embattled position within society as a whole as it must? This brings us to a cornerstone of Blanqui’s praxis: the popular press as the means of educating and informing the people so as to raise their political consciousness.

From his earliest writings Blanqui makes a clear link between the oppressed – whether in its successive historical incarnations as ‘serfs’, ‘ouvriers’, ‘artisans’, ‘prolétaires’ – as forever ‘le souffredouleur de l’aristocratie’, and the imperative, on the part of the oppressor, to maintain the people in a state of ‘ignorance éternelle’, as seen in early 1830s Orléanist France in the government’s restriction of press

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<sup>149</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 150 [21 April 1868]. See also: ‘L’idée de Dieu, les religions, source et maintien de l’ignorance, de l’abrutissement, par conséquent de l’esclavage, de la misère’ (Blanqui, ‘Dieu, c’est le mal’, n.d., *NDNM*, p. 44).

<sup>150</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, pp. 190-191, 210-212.

<sup>151</sup> Blanqui continues: ‘On ne peut pas espérer que le peuple raisonne l’athéisme comme un penseur. Il n’a pas l’instruction suffisante. Mais s’il acceptait d’instinct sur une donnée brève et générale, il serait armé en guerre et irait dès lors au fond des choses. Sans cette base, il ne peut pas comprendre une rénovation sociale, un remaniement complet de la société. Il ne se doute pas que l’idée de Dieu est le fondement essentiel de celle qui pèse sur lui. La haine des aristocraties contre l’athéisme, leur cramponnement aux idées religieuses, devraient le mettre sur la voie. Mais il n’y fait pas attention. De plus, on est si peu à mettre en avant cette thèse ! Elle manque absolument d’organes et ne rencontre que des ennemis’ (Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 356 [18 April 1866]).

freedom.<sup>152</sup> Throughout the writings for *Le Libérateur* Blanqui sustains his attack on the government's severe restrictions on press freedom as part of a wider policy to 'anéantir la presse' and end 'la liberté de penser et d'écrire.'<sup>153</sup> The importance Blanqui continually places on newspapers and the public sphere throughout his life is symptomatic of a wider insistence on public enlightenment as the precondition for emancipation and equality. 'L'écrivain instruit et transforme l'humanité', Blanqui states.<sup>154</sup> In the context of the nineteenth century, newspapers were therefore a key means with which the intellectual elite, carrying the 'arme de la pensée',<sup>155</sup> could undertake the work of enlightening the uneducated majority. Were repressive press laws to be passed and republican tracts outlawed, then, 'le peuple ne pourra plus y puiser les principes d'une morale pure ; cette source de lumière et de vertu lui sera fermée'.<sup>156</sup>

Since instruction is the sole force of human progress the power of an idea is subject to its clear communication and dissemination. 'La source de la puissance intellectuelle est dans la faculté de communiquer ses idées. L'idée incommunicable n'est rien ; elle n'existe pas', declares Blanqui. The writing of one of Blanqui's principal intellectual *bête noirs*, Auguste Comte, is dismissed precisely because it is 'illisible'.<sup>157</sup> It is indeed worth noting the extent to which Blanqui's own writings are

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<sup>152</sup> Blanqui, 'Loi qui interdit au peuple la faculté de lire', *MA*, p. 103.

<sup>153</sup> See Blanqui, 'Première saisie', March 1834, *OI*, pp. 277-279 and Blanqui, 'Attentat contre le peuple', March 1834, pp. 280-282.

<sup>154</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 244 [n.d.]. The role of the written word as a vehicle for popular enlightenment explains Blanqui's celebration of Gutenberg as a force of progress. See Blanqui MSS 9587, fo. 204 [n.d.]. 'Gutenberg et Voltaire', the *Critique Sociale* likewise states, 'ont été bien autrement utiles à l'humanité que le plus habile artisan' (Blanqui, *CSI*, p. 219; Blanqui, 'Dispositions immédiates', *MA*, p. 229.)

<sup>155</sup> As early as 1834 he referred to the 'arme de la pensée' (see Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 114), while a letter from 1879 insists on the establishment of 'un journal quotidien, l'arme par excellence aujourd'hui que nulle ne remplace, et dont l'absence est une faiblesse irrémédiable' as the means by which the 'lutte' and 'guerre' against the government over the question of the amnesty of Communards in New Caledonia should be fought. See Blanqui MSS, 9588(2), fo. 540 [1879].

<sup>156</sup> Blanqui, 'Loi qui interdit au peuple la faculté de lire', *MA*, p. 102.

<sup>157</sup> Blanqui continues: 'Quand bien même un homme trouverait/concevrait les plus merveilleuses idées (pensées), s'il est impuissant à les communiquer, il n'a rien trouvé. Qu'une autre, long-temps après lui,

on the whole characterised by a unity of form and content. For Blanqui how we write is as important as what we write. A text's political power is determined by its communicative power. Writings for the people have to speak a language of the people. Political language must be direct, concise, lucid. Blanqui's unpublished manuscripts attest to the authorial labour of constantly revising and refining his writings, removing tautologies, unnecessary qualifications and any potential ambiguities so as to reduce the prose down to its core ideas and render them as clear and compelling as possible - hence the proclivity for aphorism and overstatement, hence the lack of caveats and qualifications. Style and form likewise feed into the importance of ideas and consciousness. As Patrick Hutton notes, the Blanquists' emphasis on collective energy, enthusiasm and creativity led to a notable concern for 'aesthetic effect as the leaven of revolutionary agitation.' 'Intellectual statement alone was insufficient', Hutton states. 'The need was to move men to a deeper awareness of the meaning of an idea.'<sup>158</sup> Writings had to serve the ideal; newspapers, like essays and pamphlets, were conceived as political interventions, as weapons in the struggle against oppression, as vehicles for the idea. Is there not in this sense a striking symmetry between the linguistic style and the doctrine itself? Both were characterised by vigour and passion, force and resolve.<sup>159</sup> It can be no coincidence that the revolutionary tradition to which Blanqui belongs places such a premium on the intelligibility and communicative power of its political tracts as a whole, as seen from Rousseau's *The Social Contract* to Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*. Since the people, if they are to be capable of decisive collective action, must be informed,

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sache eu faire part au genre humain, il soit l'inventeur légitime. Mal traduire sa pensée, ignorer l'art de la transporter vive, nette, précise, dans l'entendement/l'esprit lourde/obscur d'autrui, la laisser vague, indécise/flottante comme un nuage nuageuse, c'est à peine l'avoir créée, car elle reste dans les limbes' (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 244 [n.d.]).

<sup>158</sup> Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition*, p. 164. On Blanquist style, see also Quelsques agents du Parti imaginaire, 'À un ami', in *MA*, p. 25.

<sup>159</sup> Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d'Auguste Blanqui*, p. 53.

educated and have reached a certain level of political consciousness, political writings worth the name must serve this very purpose.<sup>160</sup>

### *A pedagogical prerequisite*

On the essential question of social transformation, without the essential pedagogical prerequisite all revolutions will be socially unsustainable and politically at risk of hijack, perversion and the return of the irrational ignorance that breeds injustice and exploitation. ‘Point de Révolution durable, sans lumière ! Point d’émancipation, sans l’intelligence de base ! La liberté, c’est l’instruction ! L’égalité, c’est instruction ! La fraternité, c’est l’instruction ! Des institutions, des livres, la lutte moulée, voilà les vrais agents révolutionnaires !’<sup>161</sup> Failure to transform the individual and create a new enlightened human being will inevitably translate into the failure to transform the collective and create a new enlightened society. It is in this sense that Blanqui is consistently critical of universal suffrage: an election in an unenlightened society, where the people are held in a state of ignorance by an oppressive government, will merely reflect this ignorance and return the same oppressive government. Enfranchisement without enlightenment is meaningless.

Some structural tensions within Blanqui’s project begin to arise. First, this conception of equality or communism as the product of universal instruction and

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<sup>160</sup> An instructive comparison might be made here with Western Marxism. As Perry Anderson argues in his classic survey, the language of a whole sequence of major works on Marxism ‘came to acquire an increasingly specialized and inaccessible cast. Theory became, for a whole historical period, an esoteric discipline whose highly technical idiom measured its distance from politics.’ Unlike the late Marx’s concern for the clarity and lucidity of even his most complex thought so as ‘to maximize its intelligibility to the working class for which it was designed ... the extreme difficulty of language characteristic of much of Western Marxism in the twentieth century was never controlled by the tension of a direct or active relationship to a proletarian audience’ (Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* [London: New Left Books, 1976], pp. 53-54).

<sup>161</sup> Blanqui MSS 9583, fo. 320 [2 February 1850]. Cf. Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 183.



enlightenment could seem to imply a politics of gradualist reformism.<sup>162</sup> But Blanqui advocates no such thing. Against those ‘héros de l’écritoire’ contemptuous of armed struggle, the *Instructions pour une prise d’armes* describes ‘l’art de la guerre’ as the condition of France’s emancipation; ‘la force est la seule garantie de la liberté’, Blanqui enjoins, ‘un pays est esclave où les citoyens ignorant le métier des armes’.<sup>163</sup> Yet, as we have just seen, throughout his writings Blanqui equally maintains that intellectual analysis and ideas are crucial weapons in the war against inequality and injustice. One need only note the description of ‘la guerre de plume’ in *Instructions pour une prise d’armes* itself to appreciate that the realm of the written word is one of struggle, and a struggle to be won. The point, then, is that thought divorced from practice is impotent and inconsequential. ‘Les bourgeois révolutionnaires et socialistes sont rares et le peu qu’il y a ne fait que la guerre de plume’, Blanqui writes, explaining his own conception of praxis. ‘Ces messieurs s’imaginent bouleverser le monde avec leurs livres et leurs journaux’. Thought *alone* cannot change the world. To reject the sword in favour of ‘la plume, toujours la plume, rien que la plume’ should be dismissed as a false dichotomy. ‘Pourquoi donc pas l’une et l’autre, comme c’est le devoir d’un républicain ?’<sup>164</sup>

Furthermore, in line with this insistence on the primacy of political practice, Blanqui forever remains emphatic on the necessity of an initial revolutionary seizure of power in opening the way to the complete transformation of social relations. Compare, for example, the passage noted above regarding communism emanating from enlightenment with the following description of ‘Le rôle de la révolution’:

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<sup>162</sup> See also Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>163</sup> Blanqui, ‘Instructions pour une prise d’armes’, 1868, *MA*, pp. 262-263.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

briser d'une main ferme les inégalités révoltantes/scandaleuses qui placent d'un cote l'opulence et l'instruction, de l'autre la misère et l'ignorance, et qui font ainsi du suffrage universel un odieux (et scandaleux) mensonge, un instrument de tyrannie et de servitude ; anéantir les influences oppressives du corps et de l'âme ; mettre rapidement tous les membres de la nation, hommes et femmes, en mesure de juger d'après leurs propres lumières, non sous la dictée ou par/sous la pression d'un voisin, quel qu'il soit ...<sup>165</sup>

Some problems emerge here. Blanqui appears to arrive at an impasse – also noted by other readers<sup>166</sup> - of the temporality and sequencing at work in the confluence of two seemingly contradictory socio-political processes: popular education as the necessary precondition of sustainable and successful revolution, yet an unenlightened, ignorant people's inability to become the revolutionary force necessary to initiate popular enlightenment. How does Blanqui square his revolutionary socialism with his enlightened socialism?<sup>167</sup> How can a new political regime be initiated through which ignorance can be overcome? How, and when, does the people become a conscious political actor? The convergence of political and social forces, and Blanqui's proposed solutions, brings us to the issue that arguably overshadows his entire project: organisation and leadership.

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<sup>165</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 159 [n.d.].

<sup>166</sup> See, for example, Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, pp. 55-56, 138, 162; Bensaïd and Löwy, 'Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist', p. 33.

<sup>167</sup> These terms are evoked side-by-side in Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', 6 June 1852, *MA*, pp. 174, 185-186.

### Leadership, organisation and the role of the masses

How can an initial popular victory over an oppressive ruling power be sustained? In Blanqui's mind this was one of the central questions posed by the events surrounding July 1830. With the transformation of victory into defeat issues of leadership and organisation - already apparent during the Restoration when the people's deprivation of leaders caused disorganisation and disorientation to go hand in hand<sup>168</sup> - came to the fore. In July, as Blanqui wrote in 1832, 'le peuple ... a su vaincre, mais n'a pas su profiter de sa victoire'; the people 's'est montré assez fort pour vaincre ... [mais] n'a pas su conserver la victoire.'<sup>169</sup> For Blanqui the *knowledge* of how to advance within a revolutionary situation in order to preserve an initial popular victory, the question of who possesses such knowledge and how it can be disseminated, are key problems posed by 1830, when the lack of leadership ultimately proved decisive. Following their triumph over Charles X and his loyal troops, the people unconsciously rallied around those who – unbeknown to them – were actively working against their own interests. As a result they were lured into committing fatal tactical errors, particularly the withdrawal from 'la place publique' after the street fighting had ended.<sup>170</sup> Lacking the necessary knowledge of the dynamics and requirements of revolutionary politics, the people were an easy target for the duplicitous bourgeoisie to exploit for its own ends. While Blanqui insists that naive miscalculation absolves the people of the lamentable consequences of July, it also presents itself as a major problem that must be resolved. And Blanqui's proposed solution is clear: the people 'n'a pas été complice de cette indigne usurpation qui ne se fût pas accomplie impunément s'il avait trouvé des hommes capables de guider les coups de sa colère et de sa

<sup>168</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', 2 February 1832, *MA*, p. 81.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 88.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

vengeance.’<sup>171</sup> Blanqui expresses his full confidence in the revolutionary force of the people. But the force of the masses is not enough; alone it lacks the capacity to exercise the sustained power necessary for victory. Alternatively put, force (the masses) requires knowledge (intellectuals) to guide it. Blanqui insists that revolution needs leadership and organisation to ensure a popular victory is sustained and strengthened rather than divided, weakened, manipulated and betrayed by the forces of counter-revolution as they inevitably appear. In this sense bourgeois revolutionaries are to Blanqui the proletariat’s principle and enduring force. ‘Ils lui apportent un contingent de lumières que le peuple malheureusement ne peut encore fournir’, Blanqui would later write. ‘Ce sont les bourgeois qui ont levé les premiers le drapeau du prolétariat, qui ont formulé les doctrines égalitaires, qui les propagent, qui les maintiennent, les relevant après leur chute. Partout, ce sont les bourgeois qui conduisent le peuple dans ses batailles contre la bourgeoisie.’<sup>172</sup> Popular agency requires intellectual and political leadership to anticipate its power, to initiate, encourage and then to direct its empowerment. This is for Blanqui the essential condition of enduring victory; he never wavered from this conviction. Conceived in the wake of 1830, the basic insistence on leadership and organisation endured as the century progressed through each subsequent round of revolutionary upheaval.<sup>173</sup>

### *Revolutionary vanguards*

How, we should therefore ask, does Blanqui conceive the relationship between the intellectual elite and the people? There are two possible answers to this question.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>172</sup> Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard’, *MA*, p. 177. Cf. V.I Lenin, ‘What is to be done?’, 1901-1902, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>>.

<sup>173</sup> Accounting for the failings of 1848, Blanqui repeats essentially the same point regarding the manipulation of the credulous people by their duplicitous enemies: ‘Le crime est aux traîtres que le peuple confiant avait acceptés pour guides et qui ont livré le peuple à la réaction’ (Blanqui, ‘Avis au peuple’, 25 February 1851, *MA*, p. 166).

First, and perhaps most obviously, Blanqui proposes a conspiratorial group of intellectually enlightened and politically dedicated revolutionaries. Emanating primarily from the educated bourgeoisie, unlike the ruling class and its supporters this group's knowledge of societal mechanisms serves not the private interests of a privileged elite but acts in the name of the common interests of the ordinary people. This group of *déclassés* understands both the existing structures of domination and is well versed in the practical exigencies of revolutionary politics, from disciplined organisation to the capacity to analyse and exploit political conditions in advancing the cause of social emancipation. The problem, however, is that systematic political repression renders conditions unfavourable, if not altogether impossible, for the mass propaganda through which education and the ensuing support could be achieved. Only through clandestine activity could this group ensure its own internal unity and conspire to launch the seizure of state power through which its re-education and enlightenment of the masses could begin.

This is the conception of revolutionary organisation for which Blanqui is best known and for which he has been most consistently reproached ever since. The general contours of Blanqui's conspiratorial politics are largely familiar, from its origins (Philippe Buonarrotti, the Carbonari) and organisations (Société des Familles, Société des Saisons) to the failed coup attempts (May 1839, August 1870) and its political derivations (Blanquists, Narodniks).<sup>174</sup> Rather than going over such issues, let us point out how its central features relate to the more basic question of thought and consciousness. A useful summary of Blanqui's schema is found in a note from the 1860s with regard to religion, though the same logic can be extended to all forms of unprincipled and irrational rule, whether a monarchy or conservative republic. 'Une

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<sup>174</sup> See, for example, Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959).

minorité instruite et dévouée a qualité suffisante pour détruire une religion, sans et même contre l'avis de la majorité', Blanqui confidently states. 'Cette majorité est incompétente par (le fait [de]) son ignorance, qui est œuvre criminelle or préméditée de la religion. L'emploi de la force a précisément pour but et pour résultat la délivrance des victimes aveugles.'<sup>175</sup> Most of the salient features of Blanqui's conspiratorial politics are present here: an enlightened, forceful minority capable of overcoming its numerical inferiority through subjective dedication and determination; an ignorant, impotent and inert majority requiring external assistance to liberate it from its unconscious servitude; the destruction of all forms of mis-education and manipulation. To this we should add a post-revolutionary transitional power emanating from the capital, a 'dictature parisienne', that represents the nation as a whole. With these components Blanqui's project becomes clear enough: the enlightened elite seize power in Paris, where all political and intellectual forces of the country are concentrated, and undertake a process of popular education while suppressing those agents and institutions in whose interest it is to preserve ignorance and so threaten to prevent, undermine or undo the work of enlightenment. Following this transitional period, thanks to the general dissemination of enlightened thought, all forms of power and conflict will end, giving way to peace, 'solidarité générale' and allowing for the direct self-rule of the people.<sup>176</sup> Blanqui's conception of post-revolutionary transition is thus properly dialectical: only through centralised, undemocratic rule could centralisation end, power dissolve and true freedom and democracy, and a people capable of exercising that freedom and democracy, emerge; only the dictatorship of Paris could give way to democracy across France. Until that point, only a lack of the strict, disciplined organisation and unity of the vanguard

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<sup>175</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 160 [n.d.].

<sup>176</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 260 [n.d.].

leading this project could undermine its execution; such was the essential lesson Blanqui learned from the failures of his political activity.

Blanqui's thoughts in this respect cannot but seem naïve and, contrary to his insistence, practically unworkable, certainly in the seemingly straightforward and logical manner in which this process is often portrayed. As we shall consider the question of transition at greater length in Chapter 4, our present concern is the particularly striking distance between the enlightened minority and the ignorant majority. The people are here not the active agent but passive object of revolutionary politics, empowered only after their compliance to the virtuous few. This is the classic image of Blanqui the revolutionary elitist, the adventurist 'man of action' completely divorced from and imposing an external will on the inert, unthinking masses. In this respect Engels' depiction, and dismissal, of 'revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses' is indeed quite accurate.<sup>177</sup> But is it entirely representative of Blanqui's politics as a whole? Can we add a greater degree of nuance to this undoubtedly true yet overstated portrayal?

First we should consider the composition of the guides and leaders that comprise this revolutionary elite. Who or what is the vanguard leading and organising this project? The obvious response is the clandestine group of *déclassé* intellectuals as suggested above. But it is in fact necessary to note that Blanqui's conception of revolutionary leadership operates at two levels: intellectuals as a revolutionary elite in Paris and Paris as the revolutionary elite in France. (To which one might then add France's leadership over Europe.) In Blanqui's lexis *déclassé* denotes both the enlightened bourgeois intellectual and the enlightened Parisian worker.<sup>178</sup> As he

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<sup>177</sup> Frederick Engels, 'Introduction', in Marx, *The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850*, p. 22.

<sup>178</sup> See, for example, Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, pp. 218-220. Blanqui also refers to those from the 'rangs populaires' who voluntarily take up arms in the name of an idea as

explains in February 1832, in direct contrast to legitimacy, ‘la vieille organisation du passé’, the ‘principe de la souveraineté du peuple rallie tous les hommes d’avenir, les masses qui, fatiguées d’être exploitées, cherchent à briser les cadres où elles se sentent étouffer.’<sup>179</sup> Meanwhile, although the vast majority of the middle class fear popular power and only pursue egoist material gain - and indeed July 1830 revealed that the majority of the middle class was in fact an enemy of the people - the ‘minorité de cette classe,’ Blanqui adds, ‘formée des professions intellectuelles et du petit nombre de bourgeois qui aiment le drapeau tricolore ... prendra parti pour la souveraineté du peuple.’<sup>180</sup> As the century progressed and the political context changed, the dichotomy would of course shift from popular sovereignty and the republic against the *ancien régime* and legitimacy to the people against the rich, communism against capitalism, and so on. But if the terms altered the underlying logic remained the same, as we shall see in Chapter 2. In the necessary, unavoidable choice between two opposing sets of interests and conceptions of society, Blanqui is clear where and with whom he stands. The minority of enlightened middle class intellectuals and those masses conscious of their plight as the oppressed unite in the name of *all* the oppressed.

Paris would form the collective body of this revolutionary elite. Like the Jacobins, Babeuf and Buonarroti before him, Blanqui’s political project is built on the leading role of Paris and Parisians. Given the political history of the period in question it may seem self-evident that Blanqui would adopt this position. Paris was a crucial revolutionary force from 1789 to 1871; time and time again it was the French capital and its inhabitants that played a decisive role in the struggles that would shape

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‘hommes d’élite’ (Blanqui, ‘Instructions pour une prise d’armes’, *MA*, pp. 261-262). On this point see also Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 164.

<sup>179</sup> Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple’, *MA*, p. 92.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.



both country and continent. Certain socialist thinkers did not share in this view and the according political practice, however. ‘In contrast to Cabet, to Fourier, and to the roving Saint-Simonian utopians,’ Benjamin is right to note, ‘Blanqui can be imagined only in Paris’. Although it is no doubt true, as Benjamin then adds, that Blanqui ‘represents himself and his work as belonging only in Paris’,<sup>181</sup> by the same token the consequences of such work must be understood as extending far beyond the French capital. Other contemporaries, meanwhile, including Victor Hugo and many notable Communards, in many ways did espouse a similar conception of the revolutionary importance of Paris to that of Blanqui.<sup>182</sup> Within this political and intellectual context Blanqui’s concept of Parisian political primacy nonetheless remains unique in at least two respects.

First, Blanqui attempted to conceive from this idea of Paris a general practice of revolution, a revolutionary strategy rooted in a specific urban environment. The strength of conviction and consistency with which he expressed and held to this programme is without comparison. Second, and more significantly, Paris’s political supremacy is ultimately attributed to its intellectual supremacy. Paris is, for Blanqui, the ‘essence concentrée du pays’; ‘Paris, représentation nationale, fait la puissance de la France, en condensant sur un point toutes les forces intellectuelles’.<sup>183</sup> Elsewhere in Blanqui’s notes the French capital’s intellectual primacy is qualified in a more precise sense: ‘Si Paris est la tête du monde, c’est que Paris est athée.’<sup>184</sup> Again we see how the enlightened consciousness incompatible with religious belief confers intellectual and political leadership over those who unconsciously remain under religious domination and subject to the resulting social injustice. Blanqui in fact extends this

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<sup>181</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 380.

<sup>182</sup> See Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d’Auguste Blanqui*, pp. 173-175.

<sup>183</sup> Blanqui MSS 9581, fo. 93 [7 February 1856]; 9590(1), fo. 173 [n.d.].

<sup>184</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 263 [n.d.].

underlying logic beyond France: in every country and during every historical era, in ancient Rome for instance, the metropolis is the brain of the nation, the sole source of life; deprived of its brain, a country is reduced to a corpse that, like a human, will slowly decompose.<sup>185</sup> Unlike the modern federal Italy, however, France still lacks ‘la multiplicité des foyers lumineux et l’habitude des autonomies. Paris est seul. Ce hasard de l’histoire nous a servis, en nous donnant la Révolution et une redoutable force d’ensemble.’ Wherever found, these ‘foyers lumineux et indépendants’ cannot be improvised since they are ‘l’œuvre du temps’. Universal public instruction will ultimately supersede a city’s present intellectual pre-eminence, but until then only these historical bastions of enlightenment can initiate and lead the process of their own supersession. As such, Blanqui fiercely renounces any form of decentralization before the enlightened city had fulfilled its role in leading the enlightenment of the nation.<sup>186</sup> It follows that in nineteenth-century France the struggles in Paris determine the fate of the country as a whole. The Parisian June Days of 1848 are seen as the precursor to the nation’s enslavement and oppression: ‘Frappée au cerveau, la France ne sera plus qu’un cadavre’.<sup>187</sup> The forces of counter-revolution, Blanqui noted two years later in June 1850, were undertaking ‘la destruction de Paris, pour arriver à l’asservissement de la nation. La tyrannie ne peut bien s’asseoir que sur les ruines de la cité des lumières’.<sup>188</sup> Such strategic preoccupations were likewise later at work during the Second Empire, when Napoléon III’s government set about pacifying the imminent threat posed by the great revolutionary city through Haussmann’s *grands*

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<sup>185</sup> Blanqui MSS 9586, fo. 402 [n.d.].

<sup>186</sup> To decentralise, Blanqui explains, ‘c’est détruire l’influence de Paris, lui enlever son action directrice sur la province ; c’est mettre la lumière sous le boisseau et rendre la prépondérance au passé. C’est en un mot, la contre-révolution’ (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 260-261 [n.d.]).

<sup>187</sup> Cited in Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d’Auguste Blanqui*, p. 176.

<sup>188</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 466 [June 1850].

*travaux*.<sup>189</sup> In all cases, since intelligence precedes action in Blanqui's conception of the actor, Parisians, unlike the majority of the French population, are enlightened and as such politically conscious, capable of the purposeful, determined action revolutionary politics demands. Paris provides the majority of the 'travailleurs dévoués à l'émancipation des masses'.<sup>190</sup> Parisians think for, act for, stand for the French people as a whole.

It is this strict insistence on enlightened consciousness as determinant of decisive political action, on *conscious* volition or *pensée-volonté* at both an individual and collective level, that should be added to Peter Hallward's 'three basic principles' of Blanqui's politics. Writings from 1830-34 in particular, as we shall see below, certainly express the belief that 'when concentrated in a large city like Paris people already have all the power they need, if they choose to exercise it, to challenge an unjust government and overcome its forces of repression',<sup>191</sup> as Hallward notes. But Blanqui's early work also contains the seeds of a principle that would inform much of his later thought: the latent power of the people of Paris fundamentally derives from their *consciousness* of their plight, their *understanding* that they have the collective capacity to end it and their *knowledge* of what the exercise and eventual triumph of that capacity will demand. In other words, the choice to exercise collective power *presupposes consciousness of the choice itself*; choice requires 'la faculté illimitée du

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<sup>189</sup> See, for example, Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 71 [29 May 1870].

<sup>190</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, p. 214.

<sup>191</sup> Hallward goes on: 'the unjust societies in which we live are organized at all levels in such a way as to ensure that the exercise of popular power remains exceptional at best and forgotten at worst. So long as people are discouraged from choosing the path of freedom and insurrection, they will need encouragement from a committed and reliable vanguard' (Hallward, 'Blanqui's bifurcations', p. 36). Again, the same applies here: as the nineteenth century progresses, for Blanqui what is at stake in the issue of popular power is not simply the choosing of one path or another and the extent to which this choice can be encouraged or discouraged so much as the more fundamental consciousness that different paths actually do exist, of who has the collective capacity to make a choice as to which is taken and to collectively take it.

choix'.<sup>192</sup> If 'un peuple est dégradé par la servitude à ce point de ne pas avoir conscience de son abjection',<sup>193</sup> the people of Paris, conscious of its present oppression and prepared to take arms in the cause of the entire people's emancipation, are the 'précurseur de l'avenir, le pionnier de l'humanité', a 'peuple prophète et martyr'.<sup>194</sup> Blanqui's point of departure on this point is the Montagne of 1793. The Montagne's most salient trait, he suggests, is 'son alliance intime avec les prolétaires parisiens, non point qu'elle n'eût d'entrailles que pour les douleurs d'une seule ville ; mais parmi tant de populations courbées par la souffrance, elle trouva sous sa main, pour la lutte, ce groupe énergique, passionné par la conscience de ses misères, et elle en fit l'armée libératrice du genre humain.'<sup>195</sup> The task, as Blanqui sees it, is to recreate this revolutionary alliance of a dedicated group of leaders and the concentrated force of a mobilized city to act not only in the name of all but *in spite of all* since they will be forced to confront and overcome 'une majorité réactionnaire' unconsciously acting against its own interests.<sup>196</sup> The obstacle of mass ignorance can therefore be overcome since a sufficient proportion of the population has the necessary collective capacity to initiate and then sustain the political process through which social change will occur.

As part of this schema, and to anticipate a factor that will be discussed a greater length in Chapters 3 and 4, we must also note Blanqui's enduring and emphatic belief in revolution, above all when conceived in Paris, as a creative force, an energy capable of challenging all certainties, of subverting all assumptions, of overcoming all barriers. In revolution everything changes. In the passionate

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<sup>192</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 190 [May 1869]]. See also Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 399 [n.d.].

<sup>193</sup> Blanqui MSS 9584(2), fo. 158 [n.d.].

<sup>194</sup> Blanqui, 'A la Montagne de 93. Aux socialistes purs, ses véritables héritiers !', 28 November 1848, *MA*, p. 154.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151-152. See also the assertion that '[d]epuis 1789, l'idée seule est la force et le salut des prolétaires. Ils lui ont dû toutes leurs victoires' (Blanqui, 'Projet de discours', *CSII*, p. 162).

<sup>196</sup> Blanqui, 'A la Montagne de 93. Aux socialistes purs, ses véritables héritiers !', pp. 152-159.

enthusiasm and exuberance of revolution the thinkable and the possible are redefined. ‘Toutes les puissances de la pensée, toutes les tensions de l’intelligence ne sauraient anticiper ce phénomène créateur qui n’éclate qu’à un moment donné.’<sup>197</sup> For Blanqui, the confluence of this revolutionary creativity with intellectual consciousness makes for an invincible political force. When united with their intelligence, the zeal and ardor of the people of Paris, voluntarily taking up arms against their oppressors, will compensate for their numerical inferiority against the army.<sup>198</sup> By contrast, the condition of acquiescence and defeat is stagnation, impotence. ‘Il n’y a aucune énergie’<sup>199</sup> - so Blanqui laments in a letter from January 1880 contemplating the growing divisions and impotence of the republican left. Blanqui does not exclusively insist on the necessity of insurgent force or revolt as the source of an unforeseen political awakening and energy, as his reflections on his election in Bordeaux reveal, for instance.<sup>200</sup> Nor is the act of revolution conceived as an end so much as the beginning of a revolutionary process. But it is certainly with moments of revolt and revolution that he most consistently attributed the greatest political potential for initiating the process of social change. The task of political leadership and organisation is not to stifle these creative forces, then; on the contrary, where latent it seeks to awaken them, where active it seeks to harness them.

So if the people of Paris, conscious of the structures of domination and thus capable of exercising the collective force necessary to overcome them, is the key collective actor of Blanqui’s political project, what about the non-elite sections of the people? Does the primacy accorded to the subjective engagement of an active vanguard deny or delay the subjectivity of the unconscious, inert masses? Are they

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<sup>197</sup> Blanqui, ‘Sur la révolution’, 1850, *MA*, p. 163.

<sup>198</sup> Blanqui, ‘Instructions pour une prise d’armes’, *MA*, pp. 261-262, 263-264.

<sup>199</sup> Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 543 [18 January 1880].

<sup>200</sup> See the writings in Blanqui MSS 9588(1) and 9588(2).

simply an object shaped by an external subject? (Again, this discussion anticipates some issues will that be taken up again later.)

*Whither the masses?*

On many occasions, most notably in the early writings from 1830-34, Blanqui seems to maintain that a form of popular integrity is capable of overcoming the hurdle of the people's own mis-education, particularly when under the initiation of revolutionary Paris. Though the masses are the subject of the cruellest excesses of the profoundly unjust and deceitful status quo, in Blanqui's eyes their moral integrity, and with it their latent political agency, nonetheless remains uncorrupted and forever capable of re-awakening. In sharp contrast to the corrupt, self-serving privileged bourgeoisie who 'professent hautement un dégoûtant matérialisme' and would sell the country down the river for personal gain, the people, so the January 1832 defence speech asks, '[n]'est-ce pas le peuple qui, dans toutes les crises, s'est montrée prêt à sacrifier son bien-être et sa vie pour les intérêts moraux?'<sup>201</sup> Blanqui defines himself directly against the cynics and skeptics who have no belief in the people, professing a faith – against the 'athées politiques' who insist otherwise - in the people's moral and political convictions.<sup>202</sup> He insists that the people did not take to the streets in July 1830 because of starvation. Rather, 'ils obéissaient à des sentiments d'une haute moralité, le désir de se racheter de la servitude par un grand service rendu au pays, la haine des Bourbons surtout !'.<sup>203</sup> Similar expressions of the people's incorruptible and principled moral integrity can be found in the *Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple* of February 1832. Even though the majority of the population, particularly in the loyalist peasants of the Midi, the Vendée and Brittany, remain 'étrangers au

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<sup>201</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', 12 January 1832, *MA*, p. 74.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

mouvement de la civilisation' as a result of their ardent Catholicism, 'ces hommes simples et croyants' are nonetheless not 'accessibles aux séductions'. Blanqui explains: 'le peuple, soit que dans son ignorance il soit enflammé du fanatisme de la religion, soit que, plus éclairé, il se laisse emporter par l'enthousiasme de la liberté', the people are 'toujours grand et généreux ; il n'obéit point à des vils intérêts d'argent, mais aux plus nobles passions de l'âme, aux inspirations d'une moralité élevée.'<sup>204</sup> Mindful that ignorance hitherto often caused the people to mobilise under the idea of privilege and not equality, such concerns do not undermine Blanqui's reverence for the people, since they are above all not opportunistic, that greatest of all political sins, but committed and principled.<sup>205</sup> Two years later Blanqui then concedes in an article from *Le Libérateur*, however, that 'une ignorance profonde' is the most 'déplorable' consequence of the masses' 'asservissement' precisely because it 'les rend presque toujours les instruments dociles des passions perverses des privilégiés.' As a result of their manipulation through systematic lying and mis-education, in their ignorance the masses 'sont prêts, sur un signe du maître, à déchirer les hommes de dévouement qui essaient de leur montrer une destinée meilleure.' Only in exceptional circumstances do they 'ouvrent les yeux à la vérité et apprennent à distinguer leurs amis d'avec leurs oppresseurs'. A question at the core of the article regarding the capacity of a passive and brutally oppressed people to 'cultiver leur intelligence, éclairer leur raison' reveals a concern for the practical potential for self-enlightenment.<sup>206</sup> An ambiguity regarding the possibility of self-emancipation thereby emerges, with Blanqui already seeming to suggest the necessity of an external, hegemonic authority in the development of the masses' intellectual and political consciousness. When Blanqui translates these assumptions into the question of post-

<sup>204</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', *MA*, p. 91.

<sup>205</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>206</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, p. 120-121.

revolutionary social transformation, as we shall discuss in Chapter 4, it would appear that this conception of the people's inability to develop their own consciousness internally, through themselves, will ultimately limit his ability to conceive a politics of *self*-emancipatory practice. The result is a structurally flawed conception of socio-political change in which a gap between knowledge and ignorance – a gap rooted in some of Blanqui's primary philosophical assumptions outlined earlier - will fail to be convincingly traversed.

Meanwhile, in direct contrast to these uncertainties as to whether the people themselves could consciously distinguish between their liberator and their oppressor, another article from *Le Libérateur* confidently asserts that 'le peuple sait bien qu'il n'a rien à craindre de l'intelligence et lui obéit avec joie, malgré les efforts des privilégiés qui voudraient bien lui faire partager la haine qu'elle leur inspire'.<sup>207</sup> It is, however, a third text also destined for *Le Libérateur* that offers perhaps the most emphatic statement of Blanqui's early confidence in the people's present political agency. Considering the question of 'Pourquoi il n'y a plus d'émeutes', as the article is entitled, Blanqui declares that the bourgeois 'ne sont capables de défendre qu'un pouvoir qui n'est pas sérieusement menacé. Ils sont aussi peu en état de maintenir que de renverser un gouvernement contre la volonté du peuple.' Popular power, when exercised, has the capacity to make or break any political order. An unjust regime therefore ultimately derives its power from the failure to exercise this capacity: 'Ce qui faisait réellement la sûreté du pouvoir, c'est que le peuple lui-même ne songeait pas à le détruire'.<sup>208</sup> Hence the government and its supporters were mistaken to think the mere absence of riots in Paris, Lyon and elsewhere meant their regime was safe

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<sup>207</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 112.

<sup>208</sup> Blanqui, 'Pourquoi il n'y a plus d'émeutes', 2 February 1834, *OI*, p. 267. Cf. Hallward's 'three principles' noted earlier, which follow a conception of popular empowerment exemplified most emphatically in this article.



and their continued power guaranteed. Workers were coming together to alleviate, even if momentarily, their common misery. Even if the idea of destroying the monarchical system as a whole had not entered into 'l'esprit du peuple' and they remained more committed to mere reform of the existing order, this state of seemingly perpetual popular unrest revealed a people 'poussé par de nouvelles misères à une nouvelle révolution'. Collective political action and collective political consciousness – even if not yet fully realised - were certainly alive, proving their capacity to directly challenge structures of domination through their collective will. In the face of violent state repression and the resignation it bred, all that was required was an ardent and determined force, anticipating this popular power, to re-ignite this powder keg. 'Qu'une étincelle mette le feu aux poudres, et quatre-vingt mille hommes paraîtront en armes sur la place publique.'<sup>209</sup>

From these examples we see that Blanqui has yet to reach a definitive position on the political capacities of the masses. Is the role of 'la force intelligente'<sup>210</sup> simply to lead the people in a seemingly self-evident political alliance or further still to undertake the necessary task of revealing to the people its own leadership? With whom will the people side, and on what basis will they do so? Beyond moral principles are there not social and material factors determining the people's capacity to consciously understand and actively participate in a political decision or process? Is there really a form of fixed, innate and normative popular morality, or are morals a mere reflection of a historically contingent social order? To what extent was there a division between Paris as enlightened revolutionary vanguard and the provincial masses as unenlightened passive instrument of reaction, and how should this be

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., pp. 268, 270-271.

<sup>210</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 112.

reflected in revolutionary strategy? Blanqui's early writings begin to pose the questions, but the answers remain inconclusive.

*Principled convictions or material interests?*

Blanqui's later writings challenge many of these earlier assertions, above all with the development of his reflections on the political impact of material concerns. One particularly fascinating letter from 1852 engages with a dilemma that arose in the years after 1848 and which confronts all forms of progressive politics: the people seeming to opt for the relative material well-being of despotic regimes over a republic founded on the principles of justice and equality yet which fails to ameliorate material conditions. 'Le peuple,' Blanqui concedes, 'en fin de compte, ne poursuit à travers les révolutions que l'allègement de ses souffrances.'<sup>211</sup> 'Si la République les aggrave et si la tyrannie les soulage', Blanqui's letter continues, '« vive César et au diable la liberté ! ». ... Ce que le peuple demandait aux bouleversements, il le trouve sous le régime Russe, et peut-être va-t-il vendre la France pour un morceau de pain.' Blanqui then reaches what is for him the vital causal factor behind this political impasse: enlightened thought and political consciousness, or the lack thereof amongst the people. The masses 'ne savent pas que [le pain] est empoisonné.'<sup>212</sup> Note how the exact same argument Blanqui invokes in 1832 in praise of the masses – its unwillingness to relinquish liberty for bread<sup>213</sup> – has been inverted and put forward as the reactionary bulwark against emancipation. Material interests appear to have trumped principled moral convictions as determinant of the masses' political choices. Now they will not relinquish bread for liberty: 'La multitude travaille, mange et

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<sup>211</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 367 [6 September 1852]. Blanqui repeats this point to Maillard, again in 1852: 'Qu'est-ce que la révolution, si ce n'est l'amélioration du sort des masses ?' (Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', *MA*, p. 184).

<sup>212</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 367 [6 September 1852].

<sup>213</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, p. 74.

s'amuse, habitudes presque perdues depuis trois ans. Que lui faut-il davantage ? La liberté ? Nécessaire des âmes d'élite, superflu pour le paysan. Le moindre sou fait bien mieux son affaire.' Unaware of or indeed indifferent towards its own oppression, the people risk perpetuating that very oppression because of their – quite understandable, Blanqui insists – desire to ameliorate their material conditions.<sup>214</sup> While the early Blanqui may have dismissed such material concerns as unprincipled opportunism, he now appears to confront such issues with a greater degree of pragmatism. Material interests are, in this sense, another factor, along with mis-education, that must be considered when seeking to understand the power of the status quo, for it is precisely the mechanism through which despotism draws its enduring strength against enlightened reason. 'Ah ! le ventre, le ventre ! c'est la place d'armes des tyrans. Jamais le despotisme ne sort que de la victoire des tripes sur le cerveau.' Material seduction is another tool through which the masses are manipulated, another obstacle around which the forces of revolution must manoeuvre. But since revolutions 'doivent être faites dans les esprits avant de s'accomplir dans la rue', the problem of the process and means by which intellectual emancipation can lead to social emancipation highlighted earlier returns once again, the answers no less clear. 'Où est aujourd'hui l'initiation ?', Blanqui asks. He later repeats with urgency: 'Une main homicide comprime le cerveau de la nation. Qui le dégagera ?' And given his own outlook – the imminent rise of imperial grandeur that will captivate the masses, the confusion and fear that characterises the revolutionary camp, the impossibility of using the press, parliament or any democratic channels more generally – the

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., fo. 368. This expands on a key passage from 1834 in *Le Libérateur*: 'Voués à une vie de brute, et trop heureux de recevoir comme un bienfait ce qu'on daigne leur laisser des produits de leurs propres travaux,' Blanqui writes, the masses 'ne voient dans la main qui les exploite que la main qui les nourrit' (Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, p. 121).

conclusion is bleak: ‘Tout est morne et muet. ... Soumission absolue.’<sup>215</sup> Blanqui appears to have no definite answer regarding the necessary practical steps to change this situation and break the deadlock created in his own theory, and the tone of the letter as a whole reads with a degree of uncharacteristic uncertainty and resignation. We might note that although it remains clear that any revolutionary impetus, should it arise, will necessarily emanate from above and not below since the material satisfaction of the masses hinders their intellectual and political enlightenment, these reflections also serve to reveal the fallacy of the image of Blanqui as forever calling for action with complete disregard for socio-economic or political conditions.

On the question of material concerns, the letter to Maillard appears to load such material interests with a collective political potential, suggesting that the struggle for collective material interests is in fact the active expression of and indivisible from the politics of principled conviction, in this case the idea of freedom: ‘Les intérêts d’un individu ne sont rien, mais les intérêts de tout un peuple s’élèvent à la hauteur d’un principe ; ceux de l’humanité entière deviennent une religion. ... L’appel à la liberté est aussi un appel à l’égoïsme, car la liberté est un bien matériel et la servitude une souffrance. Combattre pour le pain, c’est-à-dire pour la vie de ses enfants, est une chose plus sainte encore que de combattre pour la liberté. D’ailleurs, les intérêts se confondent et n’en font vraiment qu’un seul.’<sup>216</sup> As with the defence speech, which alludes to the people’s dual struggle for freedom and well-being, Blanqui reaffirms

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<sup>215</sup> Blanqui continues: ‘Voyons, par où et par qui finira cette saturnale Bonapartiste ? Par l’insurrection ? Y penser seulement serait folie. Outre le sentiment universel d’impuissance, résultat du dernier désastre, il y a dans la reprise des affaires une sorte de *veto* moral contre toute levée de boucliers. Ce serait une violence faite à l’opinion et durement accueillie. Par la presse, le parlement ? Morts tout deux. Par l’armée ? Corps inerte, projectile aveugle qui reçoit l’impulsion et ne la donne pas. Les boulets courent contre nous. Ils ne se retourneront pas d’eux-mêmes. J’ai beau chercher [sic], ... point d’issue !’ (Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 368 [6 September 1852]). As he similarly lamented in another letter from 1866: ‘Il n’y a pas aujourd’hui d’influences considérables dans le peuple. Tout est morcelé, fractionné à l’infini. Personne n’a d’action sérieuse et générale sur les masses. Vous n’agissez que sur un tout petit coin, et je ne pense pas qu’il soit facile de l’agrandir par un journal éphémère’ (Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 355 [18 April 1866]).

<sup>216</sup> Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard’, *MA*, p. 184.

the unity of material concerns and political, moral principles. In the 1850s, however, Blanqui is clearly – and quite wisely – making greater concessions to the political role of material concerns, both in terms of explaining the continued existence of unjust regimes and in forging a programme for revolution. ‘Une Révolution doit assurer au Peuple dans les 24 heures du travail et du pain à tout prix’, he thus wrote in the wake of 1848.<sup>217</sup> In this regard, one could suggest the dialectical unification of communism as a faith or ideal and a materially-bound project.<sup>218</sup> Overall, however, compared with the assertions of early 1832 that the people are morally principled unlike their egoist bourgeois oppressors, might we not suggest a move away from the avowed confidence in the people of the early 1830s towards a growing scepticism regarding their capacity to both understand and determine their own fate? Does this mark a shift in perspective on the non-enlightened masses from morally principled subject to unprincipled object, opening the door to Blanqui’s generally dominant tendency towards a top-down paradigm of revolution?

Ambiguity abounds on this point throughout Blanqui’s work, and an acute uncertainty over the people’s capacity for self-emancipation emerges. The early confidence in the people certainly seems to weaken as the century progressed. In 1832, for example, Blanqui believed that his ‘devoir est d’appeler les masses à briser un joug de misère et d’ignominie’.<sup>219</sup> One cannot find therein a form of conspiratorial action that substitutes itself for the people. Blanqui and his comrades may do the calling, but the masses do the smashing themselves. Revolutionary action cannot be taken on behalf of the masses. The movement for equality is described as a ‘coalition invincible, formée par le génie qui conçoit et les masses qui exécutent’.<sup>220</sup> ‘Just as

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<sup>217</sup> Blanqui MSS 9584(2), fo. 108 [1848].

<sup>218</sup> Bensaïd and Löwy, ‘Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist’, p. 30.

<sup>219</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, *MA*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>220</sup> Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 112.

philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat,' Marx similarly wrote, 'so the proletariat finds its *intellectual* weapons in philosophy; and once the lightning of thought has struck deeply into the virgin soil of the people, emancipation will transform the *Germans* into *men*.'<sup>221</sup> Evoking some equally vivid imagery, Blanqui describes the role of leadership as that of a 'fascine': 'Quand on a derrière soi un grand peuple qui marche à la conquête de son bien-être et de sa liberté, on doit savoir se jeter dans les fosses pour servir de fascines et lui faire un chemin.'<sup>222</sup> The metaphor reveals a voluntarist conviction to create a platform for the people as they march towards their own victory, their own self-emancipation.<sup>223</sup>

A form of popular integrity may in fact provide a possible underlying premise of this discussion from which a general consistency emerges. Across his writings Blanqui appears to suggest that political or material deviations and unenlightened ignorance should not obscure the fundamental, incorruptible, principled integrity - though not the innate or fixed morality, a concept sometimes present in the early writings cited above<sup>224</sup> yet forcefully rejected later on - of the people. 'Le peuple n'est pas ingrat, il n'est qu'oublieux. L'oubli est une faiblesse de l'intelligence, l'ingratitude est un vice du cœur. Loin d'être ingrat, le peuple au contraire pousse la reconnaissance jusqu'à l'aveuglement et à la déraison.'<sup>225</sup> Blanqui likewise reaffirms

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<sup>221</sup> 'The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*,' Marx continues, 'its *heart* the *proletariat*' (Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction', *Early Writings*, p. 257; emphasis in original).

<sup>222</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>223</sup> The speech as a whole displays a keen concern to build popular support and mobilise the majority of the French people, who Blanqui believes will ultimately side with the republican ideal. Restating that the battle of ideas between monarchy and republic will soon come to a head, Blanqui notes, with confidence, 'on verra pour qui est la majorité' (ibid., p. 74).

<sup>224</sup> Even in his notes for the Procès de Bourges of 1849 Blanqui asserted that: 'Nous avons tous, de nature, la notion du bien et du mal qui est le fondement de la sociabilité humaine' (Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 399 [n.d.]). As we shall see, later, however, he emphatically dismisses 'l'idée d'une morale absolue, éternelle, unique, gravée dans le cœur de tous les hommes ... écrite dans la constitution de chaque individu, innée en un mot' (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 162 [n.d.]).

<sup>225</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 165 [n.d.].

elsewhere that the people ‘est sans arrière-pensée’;<sup>226</sup> ‘le peuple, simple et loyal, n’a pas de défense contre l’astuce, et sa bonne foi en fait une dupe facile.’<sup>227</sup> The people always retains its internal integrity, in spite of its external ignorance and corruption, which causes political mistakes and unprincipled materialism. Blanqui’s project stands to correct the unreasoned, unprincipled decadence – both material and ideological – that holds sway over France and prevents its enlightened progress.<sup>228</sup> Hence the crucial role accorded to thought and reason as the source of the principled leadership of the people. Indeed, this returns us to the dual notion of equality as ‘intelligence et travail’ outlined in 1834. Blanqui maintains a division between work, that is the people, and ‘intelligence’, embodied by ‘les hommes de dévouement’ who ‘conduisent’ the people.<sup>229</sup> The task of emancipatory politics is to turn the people from an agent of ignorant reaction into the agent of equality through enlightenment and instruction. However this occurs, even if through discussion, persuasion and convincing,<sup>230</sup> in all cases the decisive role of intellectuals remains. The people required a master to obey – it was a case of revealing the correct one, namely those men who sought to act in their interest and show them ‘une destinée meilleure’. Evoking the example of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* – ‘ces nobles génies’, who successfully fought against aristocracy and clergy in the name of equality, ‘suivis par tout un peuple docile à leur voix et sourd aux anathèmes de prêtres égoïstes qui

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<sup>226</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 190. This note does, however, rather curiously go on to say that the people ‘ne prend point de fausses enseignes’.

<sup>227</sup> Blanqui, ‘Projet de discours’, *CSII*, p. 143.

<sup>228</sup> ‘Entraînée par l’opportunisme,’ Blanqui thus maintained in 1879, ‘la France descendait rapidement la pente mortelle. Une crise l’arrête et la ranime. Mais gare les recrudescences ! Le mal n’a pas lâché prise et lutte pour ressaisir sa proie. En avant les *hommes de bonne volonté* !’ (Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 459 [14 July 1879]).

<sup>229</sup> Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, pp. 112-113.

<sup>230</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Propagande démocratique’, 1835, *OI*, p. 314.

s'irritaient de ne plus être écoutés'<sup>231</sup> - the task, as Blanqui conceived it, was to recreate this paradigm of intellectual emancipation.

By way of conclusion let us return to Rousseau, who might help shed some light on these issues of enlightened thought, consciousness, leadership and popular integrity in Blanqui's project. As I examine the comparison with Rousseau on this point further in Chapter 4, I will limit myself here to a few introductory remarks upon which to expand later. We have seen that Blanqui's project begins with the cognitive capacities of humanity as the site and source of socio-political struggles; politics is ultimately determined by human thought, ideas and consciousness. As such, instruction is imperative in the necessary development of the people's critical faculties and the raising of popular consciousness. Blanqui places great importance on the practical measures, particularly the popular press, that must be harnessed in order to disseminate enlightened thought and fundamentally transform the people as thinking beings, without which the fundamental transformation of the social order will prove impossible. More generally, then, education and enlightenment emancipate; mis-education and ignorance enslave. Blanqui evidently shares Rousseau's fundamental insistence on the people being 'properly informed' as a prerequisite for the exercise of the general will.<sup>232</sup> Blanqui likewise often appears to reason that, as *The Social Contract* states, 'the people can never be corrupted, but it can often be led into error, and it is only in this case that it seems to desire the bad.'<sup>233</sup> Could Blanqui's preoccupation with enlightened leadership not be seen to follow Rousseau's attempts

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<sup>231</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 114.

<sup>232</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 66.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66. Religion is of course the principal manipulator of the people in Blanqui's eyes, and he often describes it as the foremost emanation of 'the bad', to adopt Rousseau's term. 'De sa première à sa dernière heure,' so Blanqui writes of religion, 'elle n'a fait et ne fera que le mal' (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 61 [1 April 1869]).



to resolve the decisive question of how to empower and enlighten a 'blind multitude, often ignorant of what it wants, because it seldom knows what is good for it'? Rousseau outlines what is at stake:

The people, of itself, always wants the good, but does not, of itself, always see it. The general will is always in the right, but the judgment guiding it is not always enlightened. The general will needs to be shown things as they are, and sometimes as they ought to appear, to be taught which path is the right one for it to follow, to be preserved from the seductiveness of particular wills, to have comparisons of times and places made for it, and be told of those remote and hidden dangers which counterbalance the attractions of visible, present advantages.<sup>234</sup>

To solve this problem of the people's passage from uninformed, or indeed misinformed, passivity to sovereign authority Rousseau proposes 'the legislator', as we will see at greater length in Chapter 4. For now let us observe that we have seen how at times Blanqui goes beyond Rousseau's prescription of the relation between the general will and its guides, advocating and undertaking isolated political action that could only impose an external will upon a passive people rather than guiding the active mobilisation and direct exercise of the collective will within and through the people themselves.<sup>235</sup> On other occasions, however, Blanqui seems broadly to follow Rousseau, as perhaps most clearly seen in the assertion that the people must follow the bearers of enlightened thought on the one hand, and the enlightened guide formed

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<sup>234</sup> 'Individuals can see the good and reject it', Rousseau continues; 'the public desires the good and cannot see it. All equally need guides. The one side must be obliged to shape their wills to their reason, the other must be taught the knowledge of what it wants. It is then that, from public enlightenment, comes the union of understanding and will in the social body' (Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 75).

<sup>235</sup> See Hallward, 'The Will of the People', pp. 21-22.

of a committed group of men must be devoted to equality and the people on the other. With the coalescence of these two mutually-dependent forces a spark is all that is required to initiate the exercise of popular power, to seize and then maintain political power and the basis of social transformation. Arguably, however, both Rousseau and Blanqui are open to the accusation of establishing too great a distance between the ‘superior intelligence’ of the leaders and the credulous ignorance of the led, a position that has the potential to structurally undermine any egalitarian political project from the outset. In Blanqui’s case, the insistence on the intellectual consciousness produced through enlightened instruction, an insistence that tends to heighten the possibility of political engagement, resides at the core of his political thought, often leading him to an unduly elitist conception of politics. Blanqui’s evocation of the ‘*arme de la pensée*’ is thus neither throwaway hyperbole nor rhetorical flourish. For Blanqui thought is a revolutionary force, a weapon that must be wielded in the cause of equality and the oppressed through uncompromising, unyielding intellectual devotion. Indeed, it is to the importance of first principles and commitment we shall now turn in Chapter 2.

## Chapter 2 – Making choices, taking sides

‘Ce qui nous a perdus, c’est le mépris ou l’absence des idées, la substitution de la politique d’expédients à la politique de principes.’<sup>236</sup>

‘Ne tâtonnez plus, prenez un parti.’<sup>237</sup>

Blanqui’s politics is conflictual to the core. For Blanqui politics is divisive; it is dispute and disagreement, confrontation and combat. Militant politics means making a deliberate choice and remaining resolutely committed to that choice. This conviction emanates from two sources, what we might call in classical terms the *real* (an analysis of history and social relations) and the *ideal* (the realm of political-moral principles), both of which inform and reinforce the other.

‘Il ne faut pas se dissimuler qu’il y a guerre à mort entre les classes qui composent la nation’, Blanqui declared in early 1832. Such a diagnosis is not hypothetical speculation or individual conjecture but an actual socio-political ‘vérité’, ‘bien connue’ across France.<sup>238</sup> Society comprises not ‘une communauté, mais une opposition d’intérêts’ in which ‘il n’existe entre les deux moitiés inégales de la société d’autre rapport que celui de la lutte, d’autre besoin que de se faire le plus mal possible ; c’est, en un mot, la guerre organisée.’ Contrived words of ‘concorde’ and ‘fraternité’ may obfuscate uncomfortable social realities, they ‘déguisent une soif insatiable d’exploitation’ that may fool some. But facts and events ‘ont aussi leur éloquence, beaucoup plus persuasive en définitive, et plus féconde en résultats.’ And the facts show that ‘il y a lutte et que dans cette lutte, l’une des parties doit succomber, car il ne

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<sup>236</sup> Blanqui, ‘Réponse à la demande d’un toast pour le banquet des travailleurs’, November 1848, *MA*, p. 149.

<sup>237</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 357 [18 April 1866].

<sup>238</sup> Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple’, 2 February 1832, *MA*, p. 80.

saurait y avoir de fusion entre deux principes contraires, entre le bien et le mal.<sup>239</sup>

The insistence on the conflictual dimension of politics is, then, in the first instance, a reflection of existing social dynamics. To change society one has to understand and thereafter act according to its own internal logic. This has a crucial political implication: rather than evading the question of power one has to tackle it head on in order to seize and wield it.

But the insistence on conflict also derives from the principled commitment to an ideal. Politics is, for Blanqui, a struggle of opposing, irreconcilable ideas and ideals. Like Robespierre, Gramsci and many others in between and since, Blanqui forever poses the most basic question in politics: which side are you on? Blanqui presents an alternative and compels a choice: equality or inequality, civilization or barbarism, commitment or compliance. That Blanqui imposes rigid dichotomies between ideals, interests and groups is precisely to allow no room for compromise. It implies, indeed demands one take a principled, profoundly moral stand for one side or the other. Either you are for the exploited or for the exploiter, an agent of justice or an agent of injustice. Between enlightenment and ignorance, progress and reaction, revolution and counter-revolution, a choice must be made, a side taken. Purported neutrality is the greatest enemy, opportunism the greatest disgrace. One must make a choice and fully assume one's choice to the end. Invoking Saint-Just's maxim '[l]es malheureux sont les puissances de la terre', Blanqui arrives at the most basic guiding assumption of his entire project: 'En un mot, nous sommes toujours et partout avec les opprimés contre les oppresseurs'. A struggle of opposing 'affections' and 'efforts', politics ultimately comes down to a simple yet profound choice of idealistic moral

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<sup>239</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', 2 February 1834, *MA*, p. 123. Cf. Blanqui, 'Qui fait la soupe doit la manger', March 1834, *OI*, p. 293.

conviction.<sup>240</sup> Wherever oppression appears, whomever it afflicts, forever unsettled by such injustice Blanqui vows resolute commitment to all those who face suffering. Emancipatory political practice thus presupposes principled commitment; it is informed and guided by subjective passion, confidence and a courageous determination to prevail, to not concede or compromise, whatever the consequences. Blanqui extends this logic to all facets of his project. To become all or to remain nothing, to take power or to languish in impotence, to achieve victory or to admit defeat – for Blanqui there is no third way, no middle ground, no partial success. Either one commits oneself to the ideal, or one does not. Either equality and justice triumph, or they do not. For both then and now, therein lies one of Blanqui's foremost lessons: principled commitment is the *sine qua non* of militant politics, the basic feature of any political engagement worthy of the name.

I think it is necessary to accord greater significance to this divisive political logic in the understanding of Blanqui's thought than has previously been the case. Without piecing together and foregrounding this issue we cannot fully grasp the notions of power, struggle, the people and principled commitment which define and animate Blanqui's entire political project. How, then, do we make sense of what Daniel Bensaïd describes as the politics, the culture of conflict Blanqui exemplifies and which has been largely suppressed in our own so-called 'post-ideological' era with its rhetoric of consensus?<sup>241</sup> What are the assumptions behind the insistence on taking sides as the basic condition of politics? And how could this inform attempts to redefine the political today? This chapter will begin by examining the manner in

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<sup>240</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', 2 February 1834, *MA*, pp. 110-111. Blanqui would restate the same point in 1848: 'À l'instar de Jésus, le consolateur des pauvres, l'ennemi des puissants, [la Montagne] a aimé ceux qui souffrent et haï ceux qui font souffrir' (Blanqui, 'A la Montagne de 93. Aux socialistes purs, ses véritables héritiers !', 28 November 1848, *MA*, p. 151).

<sup>241</sup> Daniel Bensaïd, 'Entretien avec Daniel Bensaïd et Éric Hazan sur le recueil de textes d'Auguste Blanqui *Maintenant il faut des armes*', Emissions *Là-bas si j'y suis* de Daniel Mermet sur France-Inter, 12 February 2007 < <http://danielbensaid.org/Auguste-Blanqui?lang=fr> >

which Blanqui conceives society and politics as a civil war, and how this notion is rooted in an analysis of property, the state, history and contemporary politics. This will be followed by an analysis of Blanqui's politics of principles, to adopt his own term, and its implications for some central aspects of his political project. I will largely limit myself in this chapter to a consideration of *why* making a choice and taking sides is necessary in the first instance. Questions of *how* to practically exercise this choice and actually realise these first principles, of the importance of commitment, duty, faith and the subjective resources through which one remains devoted to and sustains the initial choice, will be examined at greater length in the following chapters.

### Civil war

#### *Property*

Following Rousseau's critique of property as outlined in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), Blanqui contends that, usurping the natural order, individuals seized common land 'par la ruse et la violence' and established, by law, their right to property as 'la base de la constitution sociale ; c'est-à-dire il dominerait tous les droits de l'humanité'. That a small minority owns the right to property directly infringes on the 'droit de vivre que chaque homme apporte en naissant' to become a 'droit sacrilège' of the society of privilege.<sup>242</sup> With exclusive ownership of the land this minority also gained, by logical extension, the 'produits accumulés du travail, et qu'on appelle *Capitaux*'.<sup>243</sup> Since land and capital are sterile in and of themselves, requiring labour to fructify, the majority of the population - dispossessed of their 'instruments de travail' and excluded from the possession of the land - was

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<sup>242</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>243</sup> Blanqui, 'Qui fait la soupe doit la manger', *OI*, p. 291

transformed into ‘un vil bétail destiné uniquement à labourer et fumer les terres de ces monstres.’<sup>244</sup> For Blanqui, the people therefore defines, in certain respects, those forced to provide for – and those who are thus exploited by – the wealthy, parasitic usurpers who own but do not themselves contribute towards production. (We shall explore Blanqui’s concept of the people at greater length in the next chapter.) Blanqui depicts an order in which ‘les instruments ou les fruits du travail n’appartiennent [pas] aux masses qui travaillent, mais à une aristocratie usurpatrice qui consomme et qui ne produit pas. ... Le miel élaboré par les abeilles est dévoré par les frelons.’<sup>245</sup> This division between productive workers and idle rich consumers comes straight from Saint-Simonian doctrine (Saint-Simon himself had employed the metaphor of bees and drones in 1819 to illustrate his conception of social relations).<sup>246</sup> Beyond Rousseau and Saint-Simon, Blanqui’s analysis of property is also close to Marx’s later theory of primitive accumulation.<sup>247</sup> Like Marx, Blanqui describes an order conceived out of force and conquest, dividing ‘les populations en deux catégories, les vainqueurs et les vaincus’,<sup>248</sup> in which the servitude and exploitation inflicted on the latter (the people) is a product of and thereafter preserved and reproduced through the former’s (the privileged) hereditary and oligarchic control of land, capital and production.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, *MA*, pp. 116-118; Blanqui, ‘Qui fait la soupe doit la manger’, *OI*, p. 291.

<sup>245</sup> Since land should be an ‘instrument ... pour entretenir la vie de la société’, Blanqui assumes that ‘le sol doit appartenir également à tous les membres de la société qui, de tous leurs efforts combinés, exploiteraient les richesses qu’il recèle dans ses entrailles.’ (Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, *MA*, pp. 116-117); Blanqui, ‘Qui fait la soupe doit la manger’, *OI*, p. 291.

<sup>246</sup> See ‘The National or Industrial Party Compared to the Anti-National Party’ and ‘On the Quarrel between the Bees and the Drones’, in Henri Comte de Saint-Simon, *The Political Thought of Saint-Simon*, ed. Ghita Ionescu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 129-137.

<sup>247</sup> See Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1992), part viii.

<sup>248</sup> Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, *MA*, p. 117. For a condensed version of much of this analysis, see Blanqui, ‘L’origine des fortunes’, 1850, *CSII*, p. 65.

<sup>249</sup> Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, *MA*, pp. 118-119.

Moreover, if land only acquires value when united with labour, the logical consequence, Blanqui suggests, is to own those who work the land.<sup>250</sup> Wherever property is established enslavement follows. This applies to French society as it does the colonies, where the ‘barbarie’ of slavery represents ‘un outrage permanent à l’humanité.’<sup>251</sup> While acknowledging that the slavery of nineteenth-century France certainly does not and could not be slavery in all its ‘nudité brutale’, Blanqui nonetheless reasons that between Paris, Martinique and ancient Rome ‘le droit de propriété’ - the common origin of all such social orders - ‘n’est ni moins insolent ni moins agresseur.’<sup>252</sup> Slavery should not be conceptually reduced to apply only to the plight of Africans or the followers of Spartacus, Blanqui reaffirms in 1852; one must recognise the ‘serfs’ of contemporary French society ‘qui ont les apparences de la liberté au milieu des douleurs de la servitude.’ In short, ‘[l]a faim, c’est l’esclavage.’<sup>253</sup> Hence, for Blanqui, to cite a phrase from 1834 that encapsulates an enduring conviction to naming an otherwise unnamed injustice, ‘si [l’esclavage] n’existe pas de nom, il existe de fait’.<sup>254</sup> As long as a privileged ‘caste’ maintain their hereditary control of land and capital, all remaining citizens will remain the slaves of this group and their order. ‘C’est par la faim qu’on dompte les oiseaux de proie,’<sup>255</sup> Blanqui claims. In Blanqui’s lexicon servitude is not the mere fact of being owned by another man, nor can its origins be traced to an identifiable actor; it is not a contingent political issue, nor is it the consequence of a certain form of government. Blanqui’s conception of servitude is structural in origin. Servitude means being deprived of the ‘instruments de travail’ and at the mercy of those who own them. It means, in other

<sup>250</sup> Slavery is ‘la dernière expression du droit personnel, qui est la dernière expression du droit de propriété’ (ibid., p. 125).

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., pp. 118-119.

<sup>253</sup> Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard, 6 June 1852, *MA*, pp. 184-185.

<sup>254</sup> Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, *MA*, p. 118.

<sup>255</sup> Blanqui MSS 9583, fo. 21 [n.d.].



words, wage slavery. The masses' servitude is therefore inherent to a social and legal order built on the usurpation of land, production and capital by the privileged few. Property, understood as an enduring, fundamental social structure responsible for an equally enduring, fundamental form of social relation, is thus 'une spoliation permanente' for the masses.<sup>256</sup>

After Rousseau, who in accounting for the ills of society – servitude, domination, deceit, egoism – held that 'these evils are the first effects of property and the inseparable escort of nascent inequality',<sup>257</sup> overall Blanqui also sees inequality and exploitation as products of the individual usurpation of common property. He depicts an order preserved through hereditary oligarchic control, the law and constitution, duplicity and violence – 'violence' denoting the violation of the natural right to common ownership of the land, the daily suffering that results from this social order and, as we shall see shortly, the actual physical violence should revolt against this order of things occur – all of which ensure the continued servitude and suffering, generation after generation, of those who work the land, who are deprived of the 'instruments' and fruits of their labour. Blanqui's critique of property essentially restates Rousseau's belief that the origin of society and of laws 'put new shackles on the weak and gave new powers to the rich ... destroyed natural freedom irretrievably, laid down for all time the law of property and inequality, made clever usurpation into irrevocable right, and henceforth subjected, for the benefit of a few ambitious men, the human race to labour, servitude, and misery.'<sup>258</sup> Given that Blanqui would maintain throughout his lifetime that the revolution must bring about, as he explained in 1852, '[l]'anéantissement de l'ordre actuel, fondé sur l'inégalité et l'exploitation, la

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<sup>256</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, p. 118. See also the later description of economic relations as a 'guerre sociale en permanence' (Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', 1869-70, *CSI*, p. 175).

<sup>257</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, p. 66.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

ruine des oppresseurs, la délivrance du peuple du joug des riches’,<sup>259</sup> we can begin to see how this understanding of property and the accompanying conception of wider society was fundamental to his revolutionary practice. As Marx would likewise later insist, the revolution would implement ‘the expropriation of the expropriators’.<sup>260</sup>

This Rousseauist analysis of the inequality and injustice of property, of a society inherently and invariably opposed to the interests of the working masses, forms the basic framework upon which Blanqui builds his concept of conflict and taking sides. Before proceeding with how Blanqui sees to this task, let us pause momentarily to address one point. It will have become apparent that Blanqui’s analytical approach, here as elsewhere, is more concerned with broad historical sweeps and general principles than exhaustive analyses based on empirical investigation. Indeed, having established in 1834 the position on property outlined above, at no point did he return to these issues with a view to challenge, elaborate on or refine the basic maxim. Not only did the maxim therefore remain unaltered during his lifetime, it also remained just that, a maxim, never to be systematically developed or afforded treatise-length treatment - a tendency that applies to Blanqui’s thought as a whole. What might we conclude from this? First, it demonstrates not only the intellectual importance of the early 1830s as the period in which Blanqui formulated the foundations of his political project but also the general consistency of his thinking thereafter. In both thought and practice Blanqui remained faithful to his early account of the roots of inequality and what was at stake in overcoming structural domination. Second, as noted in Chapter 1, we have and will again see here the limits of Blanqui’s ability to understand and explain real, existing social conditions and how they influence and inform political action. Blanqui’s analysis of history and contemporary

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<sup>259</sup> Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard’, *MA*, p. 179.

<sup>260</sup> Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), p. 67. Cf. Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard’, *MA*, p. 186.

politics forever returns to thought and ideas, from which arise economic interests and moral principles, as the basis of social relations. Although right to assume that politics must insert itself within the social field and act according to its own logic, his failure to fully comprehend the nature of the latter limits the scope of his insights in this regard. Finally, and linking the two previous points, it shows that the critique would therefore remain analytically unsubstantiated, thereby detracting from its potential intellectual incisiveness. The socio-political logic and consequences of property on the whole remain unexplored, then, and one would need to look elsewhere for more detailed and developed expositions. Yet it could be said that Blanqui's aim was, rather, to conceive a concise yet generally intuitive account so as to guide political engagements - and by this criteria arguably he could claim a certain success. Blanqui recognises, and is indeed right to recognise, that any form of militant political struggle requires establishing clear principles so as to direct determined action; only through declaring and disseminating its basic concepts can a political movement collectively work towards their realisation.<sup>261</sup> So while the reasoning has a flaw, as is at times, though not always, the case with Blanqui's project, the political ends remain astute.

### *The state*

To bring this historical analysis of property into the context of nineteenth-century French society Blanqui extends this logic to the modern state as property's contemporary institutional and legal expression. This is perhaps best seen in the

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<sup>261</sup> One could in fact point out that in some of Marx's political writings the question of property is treated with a strikingly similarity in register, in unstated analytical assumptions and in proposed political conclusions to those of Blanqui. See, for example, in Marx's reflection on the Paris Commune: 'The Commune, they exclaim, intends to abolish property, the basis of all civilization! Yes, gentlemen, the Commune intended to abolish that class-property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour' (Marx, *The Civil War in France*, p. 67).

defence speech at the *Procès des Quinze* in January 1832, a public platform Blanqui exploited to launch an all out assault on the nascent July Monarchy, exposing its benign, democratic pretensions as the façade behind which a war between rich and poor was being fought.<sup>262</sup> Addressing the prosecuting lawyer's accusation that the poor were waging war against the rich, Blanqui agrees with the diagnosis of war, only to propose an alternative account of its origins and primary aggressor. Echoing Babeuf's belief in a pre-existing civil war between rich and poor, between patricians and plebeians,<sup>263</sup> Blanqui emphatically rejoins: 'Oui, messieurs, ceci est la guerre entre les riches et les pauvres, les riches l'ont ainsi voulu, car ils sont les agresseurs.'<sup>264</sup> The war Blanqui speaks of is the perpetual, daily assault on the poor by the rich through the socio-political inequality and injustice that he outlines during the course of his speech.

Blanqui attacks the nascent Orléanist socio-political order and its supporters, apologists and profiteers – the rich, in a word – holding them to account on behalf of the oppressed. He seeks to reveal the manner in which the social conflict between rich and poor has been institutionalised in the rule of government, primarily in the tax system and the law. Through a grossly uneven tax system, Blanqui argues, the people were propping up a privileged minority.<sup>265</sup> Taxes pay for the rich, and are paid for by the poor. The July Monarchy facilitates 'cette inique répartition des charges et des

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<sup>262</sup> Jill Harsin outlines the political dimensions of trials in the early years of the July Monarchy, showing how, through statements at the trials themselves (which often brought large audiences to the court) and the subsequent pamphlets that reproduced the court proceedings and reprints of offending articles in the case of press offenses, the republican defendants fully exploited the events to publicise their cause and disseminate their ideas. See Jill Harsin, *Barricades: The War on the Streets of Revolutionary Paris, 1830-1848* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 52-53.

<sup>263</sup> See R.B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), p. 210; Maurice Dommanget, *Auguste Blanqui: Des origines à la révolution de 1848* (Paris: Mouton, 1969), p. 103. Blanqui will likewise follow Babeuf in taking this logic to the (practical) ends, as seen in Babeuf's injunction: 'If you want civil war, you can have it ... You've cried "To arms". We've said the same to our people' (cited in Ian Birchall, 'The Babeuf Bicentenary: Conspiracy or Revolutionary Party?' *International Socialism*, No. 72, Autumn 1996 <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/index2.html#isj2-072>>).

<sup>264</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', 12 January 1832, *MA*, p. 64.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

bénéfices' that brings greater riches to the few and greater ruin to the many.<sup>266</sup> It follows that Blanqui espouses a belief, widely held by the radical republican movement during this period, as Jill Harsin notes, that 'in order to understand society, one had to comprehend the economic and social relations between classes and the manifestation of these relationships in the government.' It was from this view, Harsin continues, that 'republicans did not see the government as a neutral force, but rather as the repressive arm of the financial and commercial bourgeoisie who ruled.'<sup>267</sup> Blanqui's defence speech is a scathing polemic against oligarchic rule. It depicts a country under the sway of a plutocratic, nepotistic government founded on the exploitation of the poor by a rich elite.<sup>268</sup> Under the rule of a government that concedes nothing to the great majority of the people and is arrogantly indifferent to injustice, no opportunities or channels exist to break the very monopoly of power that merely serves the exigencies of exploitation.<sup>269</sup> Blanqui's central aim is to denounce and expose this corrupt, morally bankrupt and democratically illegitimate socio-political structure as the primary cause of the injustice suffered in its name - the injustice present in the gap between the idle, wealthy elites, gorging themselves on gold, and the people dying from starvation,<sup>270</sup> the injustice of a tax system that is not simply unequal or unfair, but deadly: 'c'est partout que les ouvriers meurent écrasés par l'impôt.'<sup>271</sup> The speech employs arrestingly violent metaphors to reinforce the idea that an order rooted in inequality, exploitation and oppression amounted to systematic attack against the French people. Painting a somewhat different picture of

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>267</sup> Harsin, *Barricades*, p. 6.

<sup>268</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze', *MA*, p. 67.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., pp. 67, 70.

<sup>270</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 67-68, 70, 77.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

the new order than the ‘best of republics’ lauded by his contemporaries,<sup>272</sup> Blanqui describes the Orleanist state as ‘[une] pompe aspirante et foulante qui foule la matière appelée peuple ... machine impitoyable qui broie un à un vingt-cinq millions de paysans et cinq millions d’ouvriers pour extraire le plus pur de leur sang et le transfuser dans les veines des privilégiés.’<sup>273</sup> This is the violence of everyday life for ordinary people; a society structured solely around serving the aims and interests of the idle rich and their exploitation of the poor amounts to the perpetual, dehumanizing daily war against the poor that he identifies in response to the prosecuting lawyer. But not only was this ‘guerre’ inscribed in the so-called representative order - it was ‘indispensable’ for facilitating the order’s ‘smooth functioning’.<sup>274</sup> ‘Les rouages de cette machine, combinés avec un art merveilleux,’ Blanqui declares, ‘atteignent le pauvre à tous les instants de la journée, le poursuivent dans les moindres nécessités de son humble vie, se mettent de moitié dans son plus petit gain, dans la plus misérable de ses jouissances.’<sup>275</sup> As Dommanget notes, the marvelously built machine exploiting and oppressing the proletariat on behalf of the privileged classes is the state. Blanqui’s critique is therefore highly innovative, Dommanget goes on to argue, establishing the fundamental basis of the theory of the state later adopted and developed by Marx and Lenin.<sup>276</sup>

Does Dommanget have a case for such claims? One can undoubtedly discover distinctive echoes of Blanqui’s words in certain passages of the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, particularly in the description of proletarians as ‘slaves of the

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<sup>272</sup> This was Lafayette’s description of the new regime. Cited in Pamela Pilbeam, *The 1830 Revolution in France* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 84.

<sup>273</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 65.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 67. Here I evoke Slavoj Žižek’s identification of a form of ‘systemic’ violence as the ‘often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems’ (Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* [London: Profile Books, 2009], p. 1).

<sup>275</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 65.

<sup>276</sup> Dommanget, *Auguste Blanqui: Des origines à la révolution de 1848*, p. 104. See also Dommanget, *Auguste Blanqui à Belle-Île*, pp. 10-12.

bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois state; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine'.<sup>277</sup> Blanqui is likewise remarkably close to Lenin's claims that under the capitalist state 'working people are enslaved' and 'democracy is restricted, cramped, curtailed, mutilated by all the conditions of wage slavery, and the poverty and misery of the people'.<sup>278</sup> That said, we might point to the lacunae of Blanqui's analysis – questions such as the state's historical and political development, the institutional and ideological apparatuses of state power or how France compares to other countries remain largely unexplored or altogether absent – as grounds to deem Dommanget guilty of overstating the prophetic nature of Blanqui's insights. Analytical limitations aside, Dommanget is certainly correct to highlight the political significance of Blanqui's understanding of the inherent link between a burgeoning capitalist system, the exigency of continued exploitation and the political mechanisms at work in such processes. Blanqui's depiction of the state as a machine is indeed particularly perceptive in this respect. The capitalist state is not a natural and inevitable development or neutral arbiter of social affairs but a consciously constructed and purposefully wielded instrument, deliberately directed towards specific ends in order to meet specific interests. Structural oppression and impoverishment are as such neither natural nor unavoidable, Blanqui shows us, but the necessary condition of an oligarchic socio-political order in which the few maintain their privilege on the back of the exploitation of the many. Since the rich, Blanqui writes in an article for *Le Libérateur*, require work 'pour nourrir leur dévorante oisiveté des sueurs de ces ouvriers ... ils consentent à laisser à leurs victimes ce qu'il faut de pain tout juste pour qu'ils ne meurent pas, comme on jette quelques gouttes d'huile dans les rouages

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<sup>277</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 43.

<sup>278</sup> V.I. Lenin, 'The State and Revolution', 1917, ch. 6  
<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch06.htm>>

d'une mécanique pour empêcher que la rouille ne les mette hors de service.'<sup>279</sup> Note here Blanqui's description of the workers as a victim, reinforcing the idea of society as a perpetual war in which the poor were not only the prime or inevitable but *necessary* causality, the forever vanquished. Likewise, the fear of starvation – for with the possession of the 'instruments de travail' the idle aristocracy, the capitalists (Blanqui floats between these terms, as well as the privileged and the rich, to describe those who own production and capital, an issue we will return to in the following chapter) also possess the power to starve the population – binds the masses into this order and this social conflict in which the privileged invariably have the upper hand.<sup>280</sup> It would be wrong to suggest, however, that Blanqui conceives state power as relying solely on strictly coercive forces. When it does occur the alleviation of the masses' material conditions in particular can serve to generate popular support for a despotic regime, as witnessed under the Second Empire. Likewise popular miseducation, though depicted by Blanqui as nothing less than a form of violence such is the injustice it represents, is nevertheless sustained on an everyday basis through state institutions (the Church, schools, the press), generally speaking what we might call forms of 'soft' power. Whether coercive or seemingly consensual, whether exercised through institutions or directly through the state itself, all these forms of power are different fronts of the same civil war.

Overall, then, the suffering of the people is not an unfortunate, disagreeable yet overall negligible or contingent consequence of an otherwise humane, largely free and equal society. Suffering is at once a product *and* a component of the state and the socio-political order; it is, as Blanqui's metaphor strikingly conveys, the essential

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<sup>279</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, pp. 118-119. See also the assertion that the privileged 'vivent grassement de la sueur du prolétaire' (Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze', *MA*, p. 64).

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.



lubricant enabling the machine to function. He thus restates, lest any ambiguities remain: ‘Il est d’ailleurs de l’intérêt des riches que les ouvriers puissent perpétuer leur misérable chair à mettre au monde les enfants d’esclaves destinés à servir un jour les enfants d’opresseurs, afin de continuer de génération en génération ce double héritage parallèle d’opulence et de misère, de jouissances et de douleurs, qui constitue notre ordre social.’<sup>281</sup> One sees here, as with arguably all the passages cited above, the humanism that pervades Blanqui’s politics. All his reflections on conflict, injustice, inequality and exploitation hinge, above all, on their human impact, on the manner in which the suffering and dehumanization of poverty are the essence of a social order structured around wealth, property and privilege, of ‘un matérialisme ignoble et brutal’.<sup>282</sup> To understand human conditions is to understand the society in which they are produced: it is the misery, pain, harm and destruction caused by inequality and exploitation that leads Blanqui to assert the invariably conflictual nature of such a society.

### *Revolution and repression in perspective*

Blanqui’s concept of civil war is informed by two principal concerns. On the one hand Blanqui explores struggle and conflict at a structural level. As we have seen, great emphasis is placed on the unseen violence, cruelty and general injustice of the everyday life of the poor, what Johan Galtung has since called structural violence.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>282</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 67. Similarly, Marx later argues that ‘even in the state of society most favourable to him, the inevitable consequence for the worker is overwork and early death, reduction to a mere machine, enslavement to capital’. In capitalist society, Marx continues, ‘all passions and all activity are lost in *greed*. The worker is only permitted to have enough for him to live, and he is only permitted to live in order to have’ (Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, *Early Writings*, pp. 285, 361).

<sup>283</sup> For Galtung, structural violence denotes the harm and suffering built into a social structure that cannot be directly traced to an actor or subject and may be inflicted through conditions of work and the uneven distribution of resources within a society where this is objectively avoidable. See Johan Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace and Peace Research’, in *Journal of Peace Research* (Vol. 6, No. 3, 1969).

To depict a latent social war is to recognise the opposition of interests residing at the heart of the established order.<sup>284</sup> On the other hand lies a conception of civil war as the actual, and often extremely violent, manifestation of opposing socio-political interests in the form of revolutions, revolts and riots, street fighting and state repression. In these episodic moments of upheaval, of popular uprising and reactionary repression alike, the true nature of politics and society could be witnessed, understood and above all learned from, Blanqui contends.

‘La guerre contre les arbres de liberté ne pourrait pas passer sans conflits. La campagne contre les arbres de liberté ne pourrait pas s’accomplir sans lutte.’ So declared Blanqui in February 1850, noting how the ‘journaux réactionnaires enregistraient en triomphe chaque matin, les bulletins de victoire sur les pauvres peupliers immolés.’<sup>285</sup> It can be no coincidence that such statements were made in the wake of 1848: after two decades punctuated by a series of major – and, from Blanqui’s perspective, defeated – revolts in France it seemed clear that the trees of liberty would continue to be felled by all means necessary. The repressive violence upholding the status quo is indeed an issue that reappears throughout Blanqui’s writings. From witnessing *la Terreur blanche* during the Restoration<sup>286</sup> to hearing of the mass bloodshed in Paris in 1871, the series of state repressions that span the nineteenth century had a profound effect on Blanqui, providing grounds for critical reflection as both actor and onlooker. All informed, challenged or reinforced his political practice. All provided evidence, Blanqui concluded, of the war of rich against poor, of the conflict in which the blood of the workers was forever on the

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<sup>284</sup> As the defence speech affirms: ‘cet ordre de choses n’est institué qu’en vue de l’exploitation du pauvre par le riche’ (Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 67).

<sup>285</sup> Blanqui MSS 9583, fo. 93 [5 February 1850].

<sup>286</sup> ‘Nous n’étions pas nés en 93. Les plus vieux d’entre nous datent du siècle – il n’y a pas de sang sur nos mains. Les vôtres en sont rouges. Vous avez fait la terreur blanche : j’ai vu tomber les têtes que vous avez coupées – j’avais 17 ans. Ce n’est pas votre seul exploit. Vous en avez bien d’autres à votre dossier’ (Blanqui MSS 9583, fo. 114 [9 February 1850]).

hands of the forces of counter-revolution.<sup>287</sup> For just as Blanqui conceives revolution as an ongoing movement and struggle, so too is counter-revolution. 1848, to take but one example, reconfirmed that the political clash of old had far from exhausted itself. In fact, ‘la lutte de 93 vient de recommencer’ Blanqui declared in November 1848, assuming the same battlefield and pitting the same forces against each other as more than half-a-century earlier.<sup>288</sup> This struggle had already become clear earlier in the year as Rouen witnessed major clashes following the 23 April elections. ‘Les massacres de Rouen’, as the text produced by the *Société Républicaine Centrale* (which Blanqui led) is entitled, should be placed within a much longer history. In witnessing the full, uncompromising brutality of counter-revolution once again, in this new ‘terreur royaliste’ certain eternal truths came to light. Not only is the counter-revolution reliant on violence to maintain its power - it relishes bloodshed: ‘Ils avaient soif d’une sanglante revanche, ces sicaires de la dynastie déchue !’ Hence ‘ces lâches adoreurs de la force’, whose repression in Rouen, as the text declares, surpassed the infamous April 1834 rue Transnonain massacre in Paris, embodied the bloody spectre of counter-revolution that haunted all popular uprisings. Events in Rouen marked the latest episode in a continual conflict between eternal adversaries: ‘Ce sont bien les mêmes bourreaux et les mêmes victimes ! D’un côté, des bourgeois forcenés, poussant par derrière au carnage des soldats imbéciles qu’ils ont gorges de vin et de haine ; de l’autre, de malheureux ouvriers sans défense sous la balle et la baïonnette

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<sup>287</sup> See ‘Pour le drapeau rouge’ from February 1848, in which Blanqui argues that the tricolore flag was no longer that of the Republic but of Louis-Philippe and the monarchy: ‘C’est le drapeau tricolore qui présidait aux massacres de la rue Transnonain, du faubourg de Vaise, de Saint-Etienne. Il s’est baigné vingt fois dans le sang des ouvriers’ (Blanqui, ‘Pour le drapeau rouge’, 26 February 1848, *MA*, p. 135). Blanqui later described this document as ‘mon premier acte d’hostilité contre le gouvernement provisoire’ (Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 457 [May 1862]).

<sup>288</sup> Blanqui, ‘A la Montagne de 93. Aux socialistes purs, ses véritables héritiers !’, *MA*, p. 152. See also Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard’, *MA*, pp. 178-179.

des assassins !'<sup>289</sup> And yet despite the forces of counter-revolution's consistent recourse to violent repression it is still the Terror of 1793 that provokes the most outrage. For Blanqui the record must be set straight. 'L'histoire de la Révolution, comme toutes les autres, est l'histoire de vos crimes, mêlée cette fois de vos délires.'<sup>290</sup> 'Qui a versé le premier sang de la Révolution ? Vous ! Qui a versé le dernier ? Vous ! ... Vous aviez ouvert la scène du carnage, vous l'avez fermée.'<sup>291</sup> The people and its enemies are locked in an ongoing battle for supremacy, Blanqui believes; and the enemy will use all means necessary to maintain its power.

What is particularly striking in Blanqui's thought is the manner in which these forms of state and revolutionary violence are both explicitly linked with the social order they seek to uphold and overthrow respectively. So while in the upheaval of 1848 the force of reaction 'n'a fait que son métier en égorgeant la démocratie',<sup>292</sup> one should nonetheless recall that counter-revolution, as with its ideological-institutional manifestations, always advances through the same means, 'la brutalité, la violence',<sup>293</sup> no matter what the political climate. When Blanqui speaks of tyranny and reaction, it denotes not only the repression necessary to enforce and maintain such an order but also the broader conflict of opposing social interests within that order. It is in this sense that the war between rich and poor depicted in the 1832 defence speech should be read: Blanqui turns the dominant conception of (active) aggressor and (passive) victim on its head. If the poor break out in violent revolt it is in fact the ostensibly inactive rich who are the aggressors. And yet despite this the rich still have the

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<sup>289</sup> Blanqui, 'Les massacres de Rouen. La Société républicaine centrale au gouvernement provisoire', 2 May 1848, *MA*, p. 143.

<sup>290</sup> Blanqui MSS 9583, fo. 86 [n.d.]. As Blanqui likewise wrote in 1831: 'Combien de massacres sous toutes les formes depuis 1805, au profit du despotisme ! Eh bien on ne parle jamais que de 93 et de la guillotine' (Blanqui, 'Lettre à (Adélaïde de Montgolfier)?', 19 or 29 September 1831, *OI*, p. 585).

<sup>291</sup> Blanqui MSS 9581, fo. 37-38. [15 January 1859]

<sup>292</sup> Blanqui, 'Avis au peuple', 25 February 1851, *MA*, p. 166.

<sup>293</sup> Blanqui MSS 9582, fo. 231-232 [26 February 1848].

audacity to blame their victims.<sup>294</sup> ‘Chose étrange’, Blanqui again wrote in 1836, ‘que ceux qui font souffrir accusent de barbarie ceux qui souffrent !’<sup>295</sup> Violent revolt is symptomatic of a much wider phenomenon, forming a clear manifestation of resistance to the injustice of society. ‘Evidemment,’ Blanqui declares, ‘les violences poussent le peuple à des violences en sens contraire’.<sup>296</sup> To adopt the analysis proposed by Slavoj Žižek, Blanqui in effect invites us to locate ‘the background which generates such violence’.<sup>297</sup> He seeks to ‘redefine the nature of violence’, recasting the roles of victims and aggressors in order to show that, amongst other injustices, ‘a government that allowed its citizens to starve was itself committing a violent act.’<sup>298</sup> The suffering inflicted against the poor results from a systematic war waged against them by the rich. As such one must expose the fundamental order of things, the background of starvation and suffering which pushes men to accept death in a revolt for justice over a life of continued injustice.<sup>299</sup>

Blanqui thus carries out a conceptual operation in which both facets of his dual conception of civil war outlined earlier are united and understood together. Whether ‘l’oppression se manifeste sous la forme d’aristocratie militaire ou commerciale’ or the people are ‘exploité par le sabre ou par les écus’, whether seen in ‘les souffrances du paysan foulé aux pieds du coursier de son châtelain’ or heard in ‘l’agonie de l’ouvrier dont le sang sert à graisser les mécaniques de son suzerain industriel’, all these forms of suffering, violence and conflict are products of the

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<sup>294</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 64.

<sup>295</sup> Blanqui, ‘Procès des Poudres’, October 1836, *OI*, pp. 352-353.

<sup>296</sup> Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Adélaïde de Montgolfier’, 27 July 1832, *OI*, p. 230. See also Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 64.

<sup>297</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p. 1. At a certain level, here Blanqui appears to explore a similar question to Žižek, who asks: ‘Is there not something suspicious, indeed symptomatic, about this focus on subjective violence – that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds? Doesn’t it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of trouble, by obliterating from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them?’ (ibid., p. 9).

<sup>298</sup> Harsin, *Barricades*, p. 9.

<sup>299</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 77.

socio-political order of property.<sup>300</sup> The manner in which Blanqui brings together what Galtung calls personal-direct with structural-impersonal forms of violence would suggest that Blanqui too held a broad, extended understanding of violence.<sup>301</sup> Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in his reflections on the French Revolution. Before 1789 popular suffering was socially prescribed. ‘L’histoire jusque-là n’est que l’éternel récit de vos férocités et de vos supplices. Vous avez régné 1.400 ans par le glaive.’<sup>302</sup> Therein lies the historical function of the Terror: it breaks the cycle of perpetual, ubiquitous violence; it is the moment at which the people ‘retourne l’épouvante contre ses tyrans’; ‘une délivrance’, its aim was ‘de combattre, avec ses propres armes, l’éternelle terreur appesantie sur l’humanité’.<sup>303</sup> Blanqui challenges those who, in the face of the explosive upheaval of the Revolution, are blinded to the much greater ‘eternal’ violence of society under the *ancien régime*, as if the Terror were a violent aberration on an otherwise peaceful historical plane.<sup>304</sup>

All the death, destruction and suffering of French society, from physical fighting to the harm inherent within social structures - including the masses’ state of

<sup>300</sup> Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 111.

<sup>301</sup> The short *Appel au peuple de Paris* issued by the *Société des Saisons* during the failed coup attempt of 12 May 1839 reveals the influence of this concept of structural violence on Blanqui’s practice. (Blanqui was a leading figure of the group since its establishment in 1837 and, according to the *Appel*, the ‘commandant en chef’ of the impending provisional government. It is no surprise, then, that his intellectual influence permeates this document, as well as the Society’s founding declaration.) The document targets the ‘lâche tryan des Tuileries se rit de la faim qui déchire les entrailles du peuple’, declaring that the exploitation and inequality of French society were ‘crimes’ demanding punishment. See ‘Appel au peuple de Paris du comité de la Société des Saisons’, 12 May 1839, *MA*, p. 129. As the grounds on which those leading the revolt account for their action, it could be said that this conception of state violence justified, in part, the use of revolutionary violence. As Harsin notes, ‘the performance of violent acts obviously begged the question of legitimacy. Republicans, as the initiators, stressed the prior aggression of the government, which promoted an economic system in which men could not protect their families from starvation’ (Harsin, *Barricades*, p. 9).

<sup>302</sup> Blanqui MSS 9581, fo. 39 [15 January 1859]. See also the description of starvation as ‘une arme plus meurtrière’ than the guillotine (Blanqui MSS 9583, fo. 20-21 [n.d.]).

<sup>303</sup> Auguste Blanqui, ‘Introduction’, in Gustave Tridon, *Les Hébertistes* (Brussels: Imprimerie de J.H Briand, 1871), p. 8.

<sup>304</sup> ‘There were two “Reigns of Terror” if we would but remember it and consider it’, Mark Twain similarly later wrote; ‘the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years ... what is the horror of swift death by the axe, compared with life-long death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heart-break?’ (cited in Slavoj Žižek, ‘Foreword: The Dark Matter of Violence, Or, Putting Terror in Perspective’, in Sophie Wahnich, *In Defence of the Terror* [London: Verso, 2012], p. xiv).

unenlightened ignorance - are part of the logic of a social order based on the monopoly of property.<sup>305</sup> These are the ‘désastreuses conséquences d’une loi sociale qui concentre dans un petit nombre de mains toute la fortune publique et qui [dote] une caste du droit de vie et de mort sur l’immense majorité de la population’.<sup>306</sup> Property is the root cause of the ‘effroyable dégradation d’un grand peuple’.<sup>307</sup> Property is inequality is violence - whether witnessed in society itself or during a revolt against it. Such is one of the essential lessons of the Lyon *canuts* revolt: those workers who do rise up against a dehumanizing social order in which they are nothing more than a ‘homme machine’ will face an uncompromising, brutal military repression, an ‘extermination jusqu’au dernier homme’, dehumanized once again in revolt as in daily life to be dealt with as if they were ‘une invasion de sauterelles’.<sup>308</sup> The violence of revolt or the violence of their subscribed role in society – this is the stark reality workers face:

L’extermination, telle est la seule alternative qu’on lui offre avec celle de rentrer dans le devoir. Le devoir des ouvriers, c’est de se considérer comme des machines fonctionnant pour créer des jouissances aux privilégiés ; le devoir des ouvriers, c’est de mourir de misère sur les étoffes de soie qu’ils tissent pour les riches ; le devoir des ouvriers, c’est de subir le supplice

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<sup>305</sup> Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, pp. 109-110; Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, *MA*, p. 125; Blanqui, ‘Qui fait la soupe doit la manger’, *OI*, p. 293. Blanqui later resumes in the *Critique Sociale*: ‘Depuis que le monde est monde, la force seule gouverne, grâce à l’ignorance ; la lutte entre le droit opprimé et la violence n’a jamais cessé. L’oppression, victorieuse et maîtresse, se manifeste à travers les âges par la loi, expression de la volonté du plus fort. Ces lois ont constitué toutes les sociétés sur le principe de la propriété, autrement dit sur la servitude du travail’ (Blanqui, ‘Garnier’, July 1870, *CSI*, p. 247). Again we see here, as in the previous chapter, that for Blanqui ignorance is at once the cause and consequence of inequality and injustice.

<sup>306</sup> Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, *MA*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122. Blanqui, ‘Qui fait la soupe doit la manger’, *OI*, p. 293.

d'Ugolin, c'est de voir leurs femmes et leurs enfants périr lentement, consumés par la faim, et d'expirer ensuite eux-mêmes...<sup>309</sup>

Or as Blanqui affirms more concisely in 1850: 'La servitude ou la mort, c'est la devise d'extermination arborée par les riches.'<sup>310</sup> Revolt could not be divorced from the social order in which it appeared. On the contrary, in the eyes of Blanqui and his followers revolt and civil war 'helped to clarify the terms of the struggle, everpresent [*sic*] but often obscured.'<sup>311</sup> After the *canuts* revolts of the early 1830s the June Days of 1848 reconfirmed this battle; after Lyon the streets of Paris set the record straight once again. If the *Réveil* newspaper evoked 'Le *malentendu* de juin' for Blanqui the inverse was now the case: 'Plus souvent un malentendu ! Jamais on ne s'est mieux compris que ce jour-là.'<sup>312</sup> Gustave Tridon, one of Blanqui's closest followers and a leading intellectual figure of the Blanquist movement that emerged during the Second Empire, would repeat the same point in September 1870 just as the Prussian siege of Paris began. It is all too easy, Tridon argues, for the well-fed bourgeoisie and those indifferent to injustice to preach reconciliation between classes. For the poor, famishment dispelled this fantasy. Conditions in Paris during the Franco-Prussian war were not an exception, Tridon writes, but the manifest extension and intensification of the everyday suffering of the poor. The rich gorge themselves on the boulevards while

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>310</sup> Blanqui MSS, 9590(2), fo. 465 [June 1850]. Cf. 'La presse conservatrice de toutes nuances n'a jamais opposé au parti révolutionnaire que l'argument ci-dessus, et, convenons-en, il est décisif : « Soumission ou la mort ! » Ce dilemme est fort commode, assurément, pour les aristocraties. Mais la nation le trouve violent et voudrait mettre un terme à cette sinistre plaisanterie. Sire capital est une puissance sans contrepoids. Nulle force ne lui est un obstacle. Il ne souffre ni qu'on le gêne, ni qu'on fasse mine seulement de le contrarier. Il a les nerfs horriblement susceptibles. Dès qu'une politique lui déplaît, il coupe les vivres. S'il veut dompter une population, la mettre à genoux, il suspend la production par une double manœuvre. La part de ses dépenses est réduite au strict nécessaire. Tout le reste va se joindre à l'épargne, et l'épargne elle-même s'ensevelit tout entière dans les coffres. Elle ne daigne même plus en sortir pour exploiter le travail, lui arracher ses dîmes. Non, rien ! Elle le supprime. On voit le système et ses conséquences. Plus il y a d'affaires et d'activité, plus un pays tombe à la merci de sa majesté l'Empereur-Écu' (Blanqui, 'Le luxe', n.d., *CSI*, p. 102).

<sup>311</sup> Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition*, p. 59.

<sup>312</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 62-63 [2 September 1869]; emphasis in original.



the poor of Belleville were dying from starvation. That this situation is avoidable through rationing renders it even more disgraceful. The need of the many must be placed above the greed of the few. Reprising the line of thinking developed by his master, Tridon infers from ‘la faim’ devastating the French capital a vital lesson: ‘Il n’y a pas de fraternité entre le tigre et sa proie ; entre l’opprimeur et sa victime ; entre l’affamé et l’affameur.’<sup>313</sup> History took little time to offer brutal confirmation of Tridon’s hypothesis, for just eight months later the *semaine sanglante* destroyed any remaining myths of fraternity.

Blanqui had therefore concluded earlier in the *Critique Sociale* that it is ‘le spectacle de nos ennemis surtout’ that serves as ‘notre meilleur plaidoyer.’ Such moments of open political conflict have the potential for latent social antagonisms to sharpen. But following this assertion, and as we observed in Chapter 1, Blanqui goes on to say that the popular anger these struggles can produce is alone not sufficient. Anger is a ‘force précaire. La colère d’aujourd’hui devient souvent la peur de demain. Point de base solide que l’instruction’.<sup>314</sup> We thus see that while manifest conflict has, in Blanqui’s eyes, the potential to advance the cause of revolution, public instruction forever remains the sole reliable force of emancipation. Across the century it was in the ‘sanglante arène de la guerre civile’<sup>315</sup> that for Blanqui many fundamental social illusions were exposed, many political realities revealed. The extent to which the people as a whole could grasp these realities is, however, a problem that will persist,

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<sup>313</sup> Gustave Tridon, ‘La Faim’, *La Patrie en Danger*, Monday 19 September 1870. A regular contributor to the newspaper and close follower of Blanqui during the Second Empire, Tridon’s political and philosophical essays were revered not only for their intellectual insight but for the power and style of the prose, leading him to be described as the ‘intellectual spokesman’ of the Blanquist movement (see Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition*, pp. 28, 164.) While Tridon does not directly or officially speak on Blanqui’s behalf, their personal and intellectual proximity provides legitimate grounds for illuminating one aspect of their overall, shared conception of politics, and justifies Tridon’s inclusion here. This article, which explores the socio-politics of starvation, a major issue that would take on even greater significance as the siege of Paris went on, is perhaps even more notable for having been published on the very day the siege began.

<sup>314</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, pp. 202-203.

<sup>315</sup> Blanqui, ‘A la Montagne de 93. Aux socialistes purs, ses véritables héritiers !’, *MA*, p. 153.

he equally believes, and it is this view that once again leads him back to the key role of an enlightened leadership capable of revealing to the people the real state of things. Although this arguably causes Blanqui to again unduly diminish the potential for collective conscious volition, the basic political point nonetheless retains its force of insight. Éric Hazan is right to speak of the ‘immense truth effect’ produced by the recurring defeats of the nineteenth century: ‘defeat suddenly reveals the true nature of the enemy, it dissolves the consensus, dismantles the ideological mystifications of domination. No political analysis, no press campaign, no electoral struggle, so clearly bears a message as the spectacle of people being shot in the street.’<sup>316</sup> And yet if the violence upholding the status quo was clear for all to see in 1830-34, 1848 and 1870-71, these were only the localised, ephemeral explosions of a much wider and more sustained social conflict rooted in the injustices and inequalities of property and perpetuated in the practices of the state. Behind seeming political tranquillity and social harmony, for Blanqui as for Hazan, the civil war continues ‘by other means’.<sup>317</sup> With a lucidity, force and urgency of enduring import, Blanqui alerts us to what is fundamentally at stake in any attempt to struggle for the rule of the people. ‘You can pretend to ignore power,’ Bensaïd tells us, ‘but it will not ignore you.’<sup>318</sup> You can either turn away from the state, political violence and social conflict or confront it. Blanqui chooses to confront it. Where starvation, inequality and oppression abound, a political conflict is being waged. Starvation and the everyday suffering of the people were fully within the domain of politics; as such, they required political solutions.

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<sup>316</sup> Éric Hazan, *The Invention of Paris* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 309.

<sup>317</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 68; Blanqui, ‘Lettre Aux Accusés’, 11 May 1835, *OI*, p. 306; Hazan, *The Invention of Paris*, p. 309.

<sup>318</sup> Daniel Bensaïd, “‘Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!’: Lenin and Politics”, *International Socialism*, No. 95, Summer 2002 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/bensaïd/2002/07/leaps.htm>>

### **No half-measures**

We have seen that, for Blanqui, so long as property exists, no matter when or what its form, the privileged will maintain control of production and profits, the state will facilitate meeting the needs of the few over the many and, in all such respects, a war will be waged against the people. Blanqui's first move is to go from the recognition of conflict in human, material experience to the naming of it in thought. How, we might then ask, are these political observations translated into political principles and practice? If, for Blanqui, the meaning of politics is the conflict between rich and poor and the suffering borne by the latter, what is the role of politics? Blanqui's response is to assert that the meaning and role are, and must be, one and the same. The diagnosis is the remedy: a diagnosis of politics as civil war implies a full assumption of the struggle. With this comes the necessity of taking sides, of completely rejecting any notions of a *juste milieu* or consensual politics in the determined pursuit of this task.

### *Two irreconcilable principles*

Throughout Blanqui's life there was a fluid relationship between the interpretation and analysis of contemporary political struggles on the one hand and a profoundly principled, conviction-oriented thought on the other. The intellectual origins of this battle of principles can be found in Blanqui's reflections on the politics of the July Monarchy.

Despite the nascent July Monarchy's attempts to portray itself as rooted in national sovereignty, as seen in the crowning of the duc d'Orléans as Louis-Philippe 'King of the French' rather than 'King of France', for Blanqui these tautological manoeuvres could not conceal the fact that a monarchical order, a so-called

‘compromise’, had been illegitimately imposed on the people. Against the claims to have created in the July Monarchy ‘a popular throne surrounded by republican institutions’, a ‘monarchie républicaine’ led by a ‘roi citoyen’,<sup>319</sup> for Blanqui there was only ‘la monarchie monarchique et la république républicaine’. ‘Il n’y a et ne peut y avoir en France que des royalistes et des républicains’, he unambiguously states.<sup>320</sup> Between the principles of legitimacy and popular sovereignty ‘[i]l n’y a pas de troisième drapeau, de terme moyen.’<sup>321</sup>

Louis-Napoleon, Blanqui later argued, only receives lukewarm support. By the same token, however, ‘il n’a contre lui qu’une demi-hostilité des partis. Point d’amour, mais point de haine. Il n’est un ennemi complet pour personne. ... Le genre neutre a son abri dans l’indifférence.’ Just as the soon-to-be-crowned Napoleon III – who appeared in Blanqui’s eyes as a ‘[d]ictateur contre-révolutionnaire protégé par un masque de parvenu’<sup>322</sup> – revealed the threat of supposed consensus, so too had the July Monarchy’s *juste milieu* been a dangerous façade and a rhetorical calculation facilitating continued oppression.<sup>323</sup> The war against the poor can be waged through deceit – such as the widely-propagated fiction of the proletariat’s position serving the greater good – more than actual physical violence.<sup>324</sup> The idea, Blanqui writes, peddled by the press of the rich – and shared, we should note, by the likes of Saint-Simon, Fourier, Cabet, indeed all pre-1848 French socialist theory in its attempts to

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<sup>319</sup> See David Pinkney, *The French Revolution of 1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 144, 188; Pilbeam, *The 1830 Revolution in France*, p. 161.

<sup>320</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, *MA*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>321</sup> Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple’, *MA*, pp. 92-93. The facade of the *juste milieu* could not conceal the Orléanist government’s choice between these two ideas and convictions, Blanqui states, a choice implicit from its conception but one which was becoming increasingly manifest as it consolidated its power and continued to pursue and implement, with in fact even greater rigour, the same reactionary politics inaugurated under the Bourbon Restoration. See *ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>322</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 367 [6 September 1852].

<sup>323</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple’, *MA*, p. 96.

<sup>324</sup> ‘Nous savons que les loups-cerviers du monopole font cette guerre avec plus de perfidie encore que de violence’ (Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, *MA*, p. 123).

appeal to bourgeoisie and workers alike<sup>325</sup> - that unity is possible between workers and the rich, that equality and emancipation can be achieved through collaboration or cooperation, must be fully rejected. Attempts to portray social cohesion and harmony, in which the mutual necessity of working together seemingly reveals a common interest and solidarity between capitalist and worker, are tantamount to reconciling Cain and Abel, the lion and the lamb.<sup>326</sup>

Neutrality is not an option. To ostensibly renounce any form of conviction or to claim impartiality ‘entre ceux qui souffrent et ceux qui font souffrir’ is, as the ‘But du journal’ of *Le Libérateur* unequivocally states, a cowardly, dishonest illusion - hence the newspaper was conceived from the unashamedly passionate conviction to forcefully intervene in support of the oppressed and in hatred of the oppressor.<sup>327</sup> Blanqui is himself emphatic that his writings in the newspaper express ‘des convictions profondes chez moi’, convictions that were ‘mortellement hostiles à l’ordre social dans lequel nous vivons’.<sup>328</sup> Blanqui’s voice is one of militant conviction. ‘Avouer hautement ses affections et ses haines, c’[est] le seul rôle qui convienne à un honnête homme. Il faut plaindre ceux qui se targuent de n’aimer et de ne haïr personne.’<sup>329</sup> Any talk of a so-called neutral *juste milieu* is an ‘absurdité’ that

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<sup>325</sup> See Harsin, *Barricades*, p. 28.

<sup>326</sup> Blanqui, ‘Qui fait la soupe doit la manger’, *OI*, p. 293; Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, *MA*, p. 123.

<sup>327</sup> Blanqui, ‘Présentation et but du journal’, 2 February 1834, *OI*, p. 258.

<sup>328</sup> Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Adélaïde de Montgolfier’, 12 February 1834, *OI*, p. 276. Cf. the pages of *L’écho de la fabrique*, the Lyon workers’ newspaper founded during the *canuts* revolts that was also the first newspaper in the world to be run both by and for workers, which were replete with calls for ‘réconciliation dans l’intérêt de tous’ (*L’écho de la fabrique, Journal Industriel de Lyon de du département du Rhone*. Dimanche 18 Décembre 1831. No. 8, p. 1). The newspaper’s explicit proclamation that ‘Nous écrivons ... sans haine et sans passion’ (*L’écho de la fabrique*, Dimanche 27 Novembre 1831. No. 5, p. 1) offers an instructive contrast to Blanqui’s affirmation, written a few months earlier, that ‘je suis en politique de la passion la plus violente. J’ai souffert pour une cause. Les ennemis de cette cause sont pour moi des ennemis, des ennemis que je hais’ (Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Adélaïde de Montgolfier’, 16 July 1831, *OI*, p. 176).

<sup>329</sup> Blanqui, ‘Présentation et but du journal’, *OI*, p. 258.

only serves to delay the necessary moment at which people must take sides and choose, ‘selon leur passion et leur intérêt’, between two opposing principles.<sup>330</sup>

Blanqui notes how he is not alone in seeing past the obfuscatory conflation of first principles. Observing in the early 1830s that one section of the upper classes - ‘la partie la plus pourrie, celle qui veut avant tout de l’or et des plaisirs’ - may temporarily welcome Louis-Philippe’s advances and support the monarchy through its own opportunistic self-interest, ‘l’autre portion, celle que j’appellerai les moins gangrenés, afin de ne pas prononcer le mot *honorable*, celle qui a le respect d’elle-même et foi en ses opinions, qui a voué un culte à son drapeau et à ses pieux souvenirs, celle-là repousse avec dégoût les caresses du juste milieu.’<sup>331</sup> One discovers in this fascinating passage an important insight into the moral dimensions of Blanqui’s thought. A certain degree of respect – albeit very minor – is openly professed for an outright adversary precisely because they too, through their principled integrity, dismiss the idea of a *juste milieu* as a non-sense. The terms of this conflict of morals, passions and interests, the fundamental political choice at stake could not be clearer. Politics is a struggle of philosophies, of ideas; conflictual in its essence, it precludes consensus. Just as with social groups in ‘la guerre des idées, il n’y a ni paix ni conciliation possible’; as such ‘le combat doit toujours finir par la destruction de l’un des partis’.<sup>332</sup> The relationship between equality and privilege and the groups that represent them – however much they may deny or obfuscate this fact - is but one of irreconcilable enemies. One side will be overpowered. Which will prevail?<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 73.

<sup>331</sup> Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple’, *MA*, p. 91; emphasis in original.

<sup>332</sup> Blanqui MSS 9583, fo. 101-102 [6 February 1850]. See also Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 110.

<sup>333</sup> Cf. Bensaïd, “‘Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!’”.

Formulated in response to the consensual pretenses of the Orléanist order, this fundamental logic of irreconcilable principled convictions and presenting an alternative was conceptually extended to underpin Blanqui's entire project thereafter. Indeed, as the century progressed and even republicanism had become appropriated by conservatism Blanqui felt compelled to restate the essence of his doctrine. Citing Jules Ferry's claim to be a 'Républicain, mais *Républicain-conservateur*', Blanqui retorts: 'Républicain-conservateur est un Royaliste-conservateur ... Enfants du même père. Le prénom seul varie'. Ultimately what matters is not one's self-ascribed signifier, for royalists, bonapartists, liberals, democrats, republicans and socialists alike could all be conservatives. What matters is whether one supports the established order or not. 'Aujourd'hui il n'existe que deux partis, celui qui veut *conserver* l'ordre social actuel, celui qui ne veut pas le *conserver*. Tout le reste n'est qu'une apparence, un masque.'<sup>334</sup> This phrase encapsulates the basic logic that had forever guided Blanqui's thinking. For Blanqui politics in its purest form can, and in fact should, be reduced to this basic battle between those who preserve the current order of inequality and injustice and those who work to overthrow it in the name of equality and justice. In the face of opportunistic appropriation and deceitful obfuscation Blanqui returns politics to its preeminent paradigm from which he had been working all along: revolution or counter-revolution.

### *Some practical implications*

Political practice therefore has to cut through the veil of illusory rhetoric and act according to the actual state of things. In the first instance, as noted in Chapter 1, this means dismissing any form of tepid, gradualist reformism as a matter of course.

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<sup>334</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 71-72 [n.d.]; emphasis in original. See also the assertion that 'Opportunisme et République conservatrice sont synonymes' (Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 459 [14 July 1870]).

Certain texts may appear to suggest that Blanqui's programme is based around a series of fairly reasonable reforms;<sup>335</sup> the proposals outlined in the defence speech, some readers have suggested, are hardly radical in and of themselves, even by contemporary standards.<sup>336</sup> But to think of Blanqui's proposals within our understanding of 'reform' is misleading. As Le Nuz notes, 'les réformes sociales' and 'la révolution sociale' were synonymous terms for Blanqui.<sup>337</sup> His reforms may seem piecemeal at first, yet he is not merely suggesting they supplement the existing order. On the contrary, the destruction of the old order is the essential condition of their realisation. Only structural transformation will end structural servitude. 'Au peuple le choix', Blanqui maintained in 1850, 'l'esclavage ou la refonte de la société ! Les demi-mesures sont sa ruine.'<sup>338</sup> Acts of charity or minor concessions occasionally conceded to the people by their oppressors therefore must be dismissed,<sup>339</sup> just as any exclusively legal path to emancipation must be rejected. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 1, for Blanqui the mere existence of a law did not mean that it was not 'ridiculous', 'odious' or 'immoral'. On the contrary, the rich simply hide behind the 'abstract word' of the law so as not to confront the suffering created and reproduced in the name of that very law.<sup>340</sup> 'When powerful men abuse it,' Rousseau's *Discourse on Political Economy* declares, 'the law becomes an offensive weapon for them and a shield against the weak, and the pretext of public security is always the most

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<sup>335</sup> In place of the grossly unjust, unequal, unrepresentative system he believes was imposed on the French people in the wake of July 1830, Blanqui outlines a republic built around a set of concrete reforms: he calls for universal suffrage to allow the French people to choose their government and legislators; for an equitable, progressive tax and credit system; for the Stock Exchange – the 'funeste tripotage' – to be replaced with a system of national banks; and for a patriotic war, not of conquest, but to restore national prestige. See Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze', *MA*, p. 71.

<sup>336</sup> Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection*, p. 48; Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 98.

<sup>337</sup> Le Nuz, 'Introduction', *MA*, p. 32.

<sup>338</sup> Blanqui MSS, 9590(2), fo. 465 [June 1850].

<sup>339</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze', p. 71.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.



dangerous scourge of the people.’<sup>341</sup> Blanqui espouses with equal force these concerns regarding legally sanctioned injustice, particularly when justified in the name of stability and order. Against the belief that ‘la loi est respectable parce qu’elle est la loi’, for Blanqui the law ‘n’est respectable que si elle a ses racines dans la conscience publique et dans la justice. Hors de là ce n’est plus que la force brutale.’<sup>342</sup> The struggle for justice does not recognise and will not yield to illegitimate forces.

Social change is first and foremost a question of political power: of who has it, of who will take it, of who will wield it. Blanqui knows that social emancipation can only be realised through the struggle for and seizure of power – that is, in the domain of politics. This marks his clearest rupture from ‘utopian’ socialism. We might recall, in fact, the etymology of ‘utopia’. Based on the Greek ‘ou’ (not) and ‘topos’ (place), the word itself - in essence ‘not here’ - highlights the belief, characteristic of all ‘utopian’ thought, that future forms of egalitarian social organisation can only be conceived through intellectual withdrawal. Practice followed suit. All the various utopian-inspired projects, from the *phalanstères* of Fourier to the Icarian communities of Cabet, sought to change society from the outside in. Equality would emerge not here, but in the confined isolation of rural France or the United States. By direct contrast, Blanqui’s project to seize centralised state power in Paris in order to institute the rule of popular sovereignty across France moves from the inside out in an affirmation of the here and now. To change society one has to first take and maintain political power – such is one of Blanqui’s most basic assumptions. For Blanqui socialism is not about ‘inventing the future’;<sup>343</sup> it is only through collectively working

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<sup>341</sup> Rousseau, ‘Discourse on Political Economy’, pp. 20-21.

<sup>342</sup> Blanqui MSS 9582, fo. 35 [n.d.].

<sup>343</sup> Cf. *Quand les socialistes inventaient l’avenir: Presse, théories et expériences, 1825-1860*, eds. Thomas Bouchet, Vincent Bourdeau et al (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2015). It is instructive to note that Blanqui barely features in this volume. Whether this is a deliberate omission on the part of the editors is unclear, however.

to realise the principle of social equality that its actual form will become clear, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

By the same token, the role of the republic within this schema is that of a vehicle for the idea of equality. Blanqui sees the republic as but a (political) means or form to realise the (social) end or content; it is not the definitive means, still less the end in and of itself. Revolutionaries do not venerate institutions. In politics they are in fact ‘profondément indifférents à la forme’. Bypassing such distractions they go straight to the core of society, to the struggle of equality against privilege.<sup>344</sup> Revolutionaries only self-identify as republicans because ‘nous espérons de la république une refonte sociale’. But a caveat must be added: ‘Si la république devait tromper cette espérance, nous cesserions d’être républicains’.<sup>345</sup> ‘La République serait un mensonge si elle ne devait être que la substitution d’une forme de gouvernement à une autre’, Blanqui’s *Société Républicaine Centrale* later declared in March 1848. ‘Il ne suffit pas de changer les mots, il faut changer les choses.’ Therein lies the relationship between real, material social change and the political form delivering it: ‘La République, c’est l’émancipation des ouvriers, c’est la fin du règne de l’exploitation, c’est l’avènement d’un ordre nouveau qui affranchira le travail et la tyrannie du capital.’<sup>346</sup> Any political form, republican or otherwise, that failed to achieve such ends must be opposed. Blanqui’s ultimate loyalty is to equality, not the republic; one has to serve the idea as the social end, not its political form as the means. The republican model of nineteenth-century France is another stage in the historical struggle to achieve real equality.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 108.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108. See also Blanqui, ‘Propagande Démocratique’, 1835, *OI*, p. 314 for a lucid description of the relationship between political means (electoral reform, universal suffrage) and social ends (establishing real equality).

<sup>346</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 95 [22 March 1848].

<sup>347</sup> Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 108.

It is interesting to note how many contemporary debates on communism share in Blanqui's basic assumption here: if the form of the idea's realisation failed and the political answer to the social question proved to be misconceived, that is not to say that the original idea – be it justice, equality, emancipation or communism - should be abandoned. Rather, failure compels us to seek new avenues and solutions capable of realising the idea. In all cases, the task, Blanqui reasons, is not to deny or retreat from the social conflict but to recognise and confront it head on through political, through *revolutionary*, struggle. This is indeed one of central messages of the letter to Maillard: to be a socialist is to be a revolutionary, and vice versa. Not all socialists were so, of course. The likes of Louis Blanc, Ledru-Rollin and those prominent figures in the provisional government of 1848, not to mention the 'utopian' socialists, were, in Blanqui's eyes, '*socialistes pacifiques*, gens de cabinet ... dépaysés au milieu des armes et du tumulte'; evading the question of how to actually overthrow the old order and make revolution - and in some cases wary of doing so at all - they were 'révolutionnaires seulement par les idées'. Blanqui's revolutionary socialism, by contrast, unifies revolutionary thought with revolutionary action; it is, in every respect, a 'socialisme pratique', as he terms it, a political praxis rooted in the exigencies of the practical so as to realise the possible.<sup>348</sup> A socialist believes in 'l'égalité réelle entre les citoyens, le renversement de toutes les castes et de toutes les tyrannies'.<sup>349</sup> How will this be realised? What will it take? Blanqui's revolutionary socialism poses these inescapable political questions; it advocates the necessity of a determined and organised insurgent force, of the seizure of power and of the overpowering of the enemy in the realisation of this egalitarian principle. Any

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<sup>348</sup> For Bensaïd and Löwy 'Blanqui displays a robustly practical understanding of the possible' ('Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist', p. 32). See also Trotsky's description of Blanqui's 'military revolutionary realism' in 'The History of the Russian Revolution. Volume Three: The Triumph of the Soviets', ch. 43 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch43.htm>>

<sup>349</sup> Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', *MA*, pp. 179, 185.

deviation from these practical imperatives, any failure to confront the question of political power would forever hold the same outcome, defeat, in all its consequences: violent repression at first, poverty and suffering forever.<sup>350</sup>

One question that has been lingering since the earlier discussion of the state concerns the pertinence of this conception of power today. For Blanqui the government, the state, organises and determines all facets of social relations, from popular consciousness and morality to material well-being, hence the belief that seizing state power is the prerequisite to social change.<sup>351</sup> In light of the work of Gramsci and of Michel Foucault further still, many would dismiss Blanqui's views as reductive and limited, at once conforming to and anticipating the anachronistic Jacobin-Leninist stato-centric view of power. There is a certain amount of truth to this. Nonetheless, one cannot deny that established power today remains no less of a consciously-organised actor deliberately deploying strategies – which themselves need not necessarily use physical force nor direct personal agency, debt being one such example – to coerce and control. Attempts to re-think emancipatory politics cannot overlook the role of the state, both uni- and multilaterally, as the unifying site of these mechanisms of power, purposefully advancing the specific interests it represents and defends, consciously constructing and organising social relations.

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<sup>350</sup> Blanqui, 'Avis au peuple', *MA*, p. 167.

<sup>351</sup> Governments, Blanqui writes, 'sont responsables de tout, de l'ignorance, de la misère, de la perversion des idées et des mœurs, de la décadence et de la ruine matérielle, intellectuelle et morale. Le pain du peuple dépend d'eux aussi bien que son honneur. ... La question de gouvernement est une question de vie ou de mort.' This position also explains Blanqui's rejection of cooperatives, as he continues: 'Rien ne serait plus funeste que de détruire cette vérité dans l'esprit des masses et de leur persuader que leur bien-être matériel n'est pas de la compétence de l'État. C'est ce qu'a tenté la coopération, soufflée par l'économie politique du laissez-passer et du laissez-faire, qui veut, paraît-il, qu'on passe et qu'on fasse, alors même qu'il n'est permis ni de faire, ni de passer. Elle a essayé de convaincre les prolétaires qu'il serait facile de marcher, pieds et mains liés. L'illusion ne sera pas longue' (Blanqui, 'Projet de discours', Auguste 1867, *CSII*, pp. 158-159.)

### First principles

Blanqui's is a politics of conviction over calculation. Alongside the rejection of any *juste milieu* on the grounds that the rhetoric of neutrality, the denial of passion or self-interest is the mask that conceals the face of the continued material impoverishment and disenfranchisement of the poor, Blanqui also rejects the politics of expediency for the politics of principles. In this final section, I will consider the content of these principles and how this links to the (more formal) concerns discussed above.

#### *Equality and justice*

Blanqui defines equality first against inequality and second as a historical, indeed eternal struggle that continues from generation to generation. France may lead the way, but the march towards the triumph of absolute equality continues across countries.<sup>352</sup> It is a battle between 'le privilège et l'égalité'; these are, Blanqui believes, 'les deux principes qui se disputent la France dès son berceau'.<sup>353</sup> Blanqui traces a centuries-long battle between privilege and equality, highlighting the multiple struggles against feudal tyranny, ignorance and oppression.<sup>354</sup> Adopting different guises over time and across the world, the fundamental conflict between privilege and equality has always existed: as long as a social system founded on property and exploitation reproduces itself, the struggle for equality remains just as constant.<sup>355</sup> In doing so, Blanqui outlines a view of politics as a moral and historical project that transcends the constraints of 'official' politics in its aim to realise the emancipation of the French people. These writings certainly do not lack breadth and ambition.

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<sup>352</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>353</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, pp. 109, 112.

<sup>354</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 111.

<sup>355</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, p. 118.

Blanqui's concern with the practical problems of the present is understood in relation to a much wider historical struggle over the fundamental structures of society. In many ways Blanqui sees himself as the contemporary agent of a struggle that transcends the temporal and geographical boundaries to which his thought is often reduced and confined.

'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité'.<sup>356</sup> This declaration – the title of an article from *Le Libérateur* – heralds the arrival of the core, animating principle, alongside justice, of Blanqui's politics. The tripartite motto of 'Liberté ! bien-être ! dignité extérieure !'<sup>357</sup> expressed in the defense speech two years earlier has now been subsumed by one sole idea. Against mere equality before the law or equality of opportunity, Blanqui stands for 'l'égalité réelle entre les citoyens, le renversement de toutes les castes et de toutes les tyrannies'.<sup>358</sup> Equality, for Blanqui, means the end of all forms of exploitation of man by man – that is, in the first instance, the end of individual property ownership, understood as the origin of all other forms of exploitation.<sup>359</sup> Equality unifies humanity and ends egoism, suffering, exploitation, the usurpation of rights and the enforcement of autocratic rule, all of which are not only profoundly harmful and destructive but also utterly irrational – hence equality is not only 'possible' but 'nécessaire'.<sup>360</sup> Equality means 'le principe d'ordre et de justice éternelle'. The highest expression of enlightened thought, equality establishes unity, fraternity and 'le bien-être de tous' on earth, bringing an end to 'la distinction des privilégiés et des prolétaires', which itself represents 'le plus grand service qu'elle rendra à l'humanité.' Put simply: 'Egalité, droit commun, ces deux mots résument

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<sup>356</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 107.

<sup>357</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze', *MA*, p. 76.

<sup>358</sup> Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', *MA*, p. 179.

<sup>359</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, p. 117.

<sup>360</sup> Blanqui, 'Propagande Démocratique', *OI*, p. 314.

tous nos projets d'améliorations et de réforme sociale.'<sup>361</sup> Inequality denotes ignorance, deceit, hatred, isolation, expropriation, disorder, destruction and violence; absolute equality signifies, in intentionally broad terms, the antithesis of all these values.<sup>362</sup> Where egoism and competition, hatred and isolation, war and destruction, idleness and exploitation once reigned, unity and fraternity, association and collective well being, enlightenment and work would emerge.<sup>363</sup> Equality and justice are thus employed largely interchangeably. If justice is the universality of 'l'unité de droits et de devoirs', equality and solidarity are accordingly sometimes described as the meaning of justice,<sup>364</sup> itself the ultimate arbiter of social relations. Elsewhere, as we have seen above and will see again below, equality is the overarching principle through which justice derives its meaning.

In more concrete terms, equality and justice could not be achieved through equal land redistribution, Blanqui insists, for this would merely recreate individual ownership of the 'instruments de travail' with which major estates and social inequality would promptly return. Individualism would only be overcome by collective ownership of the land and the 'instruments de travail' – that is, through association.<sup>365</sup> 'Le communisme n'est que le terme (final) dernier de l'association.'<sup>366</sup> Beyond holding up the idea of association or communism, no further insights are offered into the functioning of such a system – again, an intentional decision on Blanqui's part as he renounces any capacity to prescribe the ends of an emancipatory process. A passage from the first volume of *Critique Sociale* provides a useful

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<sup>361</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 110; 'Tout l'espoir des prolétaires est dans la République', January 1834, *OI*, p. 255.

<sup>362</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>363</sup> See, for example, 'Formulaire de reception de la Société des Familles', July-August 1834, *OI*, p. 300.

<sup>364</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 274 [n.d.].

<sup>365</sup> See Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, pp. 116, 126.

<sup>366</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 59 [15 March 1869].

overview of this relationship between first principles and socio-political arrangements. ‘Sous le régime communautaire,’ writes Blanqui, ‘le bien profite à tout le monde et le mal ne profite à personne. Les bonnes récoltes sont une bénédiction, les mauvaises une calamité. Nul ne bénéficie de ce qui nuit aux autres et ne souffre de ce qui leur est utile. Toutes choses se règlent selon la justice et la raison.’<sup>367</sup> Just as we saw regarding Blanqui’s critique of property, the point is not to strictly define equality and justice so much as maintain them as guiding principles in the realisation and eventual organisation of social arrangements. The revolution, Blanqui thus explains, ‘doit se faire au profit du travail contre la tyrannie du capital et reconstituer la société sur la base de la justice.’<sup>368</sup>

### *The struggle over meaning*

The relationship between equality and freedom is a problematic yet politically significant issue worth considering. In the first instance Blanqui is more or less clear: ‘La démocratie avec le principe d’autorité, c’est le régime asiatique, l’égalité des esclaves. La démocratie avec la liberté, c’est l’idée moderne, l’égalité des citoyens.’<sup>369</sup> Until 1848 the evocation of such terms or indeed of the tripartite republican motto remain largely unqualified in Blanqui’s writings. As the events of 1848 unfolded and particularly by the late 1860s, however, the extent to which words like ‘democracy’ and particularly ‘freedom’ had become ‘le drapeau de la contre-révolution toute entière’ increasingly drew Blanqui’s attention. He observes how a notion of freedom – conceived in the liberal sense as the absence of interference – is ultimately invoked as nothing more than a justification for the oppression and exploitation of one individual or group by another, accompanied by the belief in

<sup>367</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 175.

<sup>368</sup> Blanqui, ‘Instructions pour une prise d’armes’, 1868, *MA*, p. 257.

<sup>369</sup> Blanqui MSS 9586, fo 403 [n.d.].



equality before the law as the only possible form of equality.<sup>370</sup> Blanqui, by contrast, not only conceives freedom in terms of the emancipation from oppression and exploitation - deprived of their 'instruments de travail' and therefore at the mercy of those who do own them, man is not free - but also insists that freedom and equality are indivisible. 'Il ne peut pas y avoir, il n'y a pas d'égalité sans liberté. L'Egalité seule peut établir et conserver la liberté.'<sup>371</sup> Where inequality persists freedom does not exist. The end of exploitation alone could ensure the end of domination, and vice versa. But under no circumstances could freedom be deprived of equality as its essential qualification. Appeals to freedom in the name of cupidity and egoism strip it of its 'real' meaning and deceive the people, Blanqui believes. Those, like himself, who uphold freedom in its 'real' sense - in so doing demarcating the parameters of their specific political space and its distance from the nefarious forces of opportunistic manipulation - are left with no choice: 'Rayons ce mot de notre dictionnaire. ... L'Egalité, voilà notre devise. Elle renferme tout. ... Aussi jamais l'ennemi ne prononce ce nom d'Egalité. Il lui est odieux.'<sup>372</sup>

As with the question of the relationship between political form and social content, Blanqui's concern for the reactionary appropriation of once progressive notions is again timely in the eyes of the contemporary reader. Take recent debates on

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<sup>370</sup> 'Liberté !' Ce mot est aujourd'hui la drapeau de la contre-révolution toute entière. Nous disons : « ce mot », parce ce n'est plus qu'un mot, mot perfide est menteur, mot de tromperie et de trahison. Quelle est la devise des Jésuites ? – La Liberté. – des aristocrates ? La Liberté - de l'exploitation ? La liberté. La liberté, pour les prêtres, c'est, comme ils disent, la liberté du *bien*, la liberté de bruler les libres penseurs, la liberté de l'inquisition. Pour les aristocrates, c'est la suprématie de ce qu'on appelle les grandes existences, la liberté d'avoir les esclaves. Bancel s'écrie. « Sans la liberté, point d'Egalité ! ou plutôt l'Egalité dans la servitude ! » L'égalité dans la servitude ! Les pauvres seuls la connaissent, ils n'en connaissent même point d'autre. Disons bien haut : « sans l'Egalité, point d'autre liberté que celle de l'oppression. « Très bien » réplique l'aristocrate, « l'Egalité devant la loi. Car, elle seule est possible. » L'Egalité devant la loi ! il faut beaucoup d'audace pour affirmer encore cet odieux mensonge en présence de la réalité' (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 63-64 [1869]).

<sup>371</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 171 [14 July 1869]. Cf. 'L'Egalité est la limite de la Liberté' (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 71 [15 Novembre 1869]).

<sup>372</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 171 [14 July 1869]; cf. 'Liberté ! L'égalité ! Fraternité ! Voilà qui est bien, qui est sublime. C'est clair, net et surtout laconique. Cette formule résume l'avenir de l'humanité ; c'est la notre' (Blanqui MSS 9587, fo. 204 [n.d.]).

the continued relevance of the word democracy. If at times Badiou voices skepticism as to whether the word can be salvaged from its contemporary reactionary usage,<sup>373</sup> on other occasions he is unequivocal: ‘The enemy today is not called Empire or Capital. It is called Democracy.’<sup>374</sup> Blanqui’s anticipation of this point is emphatic. ‘Quelque sinistre escobarderie, embusquée derrière une définition. L’oligarchie ne s’intitule-t-elle pas démocratie ... ?’<sup>375</sup> Whether ‘duty’ and ‘virtue’ or ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, in all cases the same logic is at work applies: ‘Aujourd’hui chaque mot signifie des choses toutes différentes et diamétralement contraires.’<sup>376</sup> ‘Laissons ce mot’, he therefore concludes with regard to ‘democracy’. ‘Il est déshonoré, depuis que les suppôts de la servitude dans les deux mondes l’ont pris pour enseigne. C’est leur tactique de tromper le peuple en s’affublant de notre livrée. Ruse de l’ennemi qui endosse l’uniforme des assiégés pour se glisser dans la place.’<sup>377</sup> As we have just seen, freedom is likewise a ‘mot volé par les oppresseurs pour déguiser la tyrannie.’ In Blanqui’s view any word, however cherished, appropriated and altered in meaning by the enemy so as to serve as an instrument of deception and oppression must be abandoned.<sup>378</sup>

No less than one hundred and fifty years apart, in both cases the same question nonetheless presents itself: when oligarchy operates under the banner of democracy and egoist greed is celebrated in the name of freedom, should we follow Blanqui and Badiou in abandoning these terms? Just as both Blanqui and Badiou alike insist on

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<sup>373</sup> Badiou, ‘The Idea of Communism’, p. 9, n.10.

<sup>374</sup> Badiou cited in Jason Barker, ‘Translator’s Introduction’, in Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), p. xxviii.

<sup>375</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 188.

<sup>376</sup> Blanqui MSS 9587, fo. 359 [January 1862].

<sup>377</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 277 [December 1862].

<sup>378</sup> Blanqui explains: ‘Il faut rejeter tous les mots qu’ils nous prennent pour les travestis, et en faire des instruments d’iniquité. [...] Il ne faut pas prendre à l’ennemi ses mots. Il faut même lui abandonner les autres, quand il s’en emparer, même nos (les) mots qui nous furent les plus chers, celui de liberté. Il a changé de sens. Liberté, dans la bouche des Chrétiens, signifie liberté de l’inquisition ; dans la bouche des aristocrates, liberté veut dire liberté des grandes existences, liberté de l’exploitation, liberté d’avoir des esclaves’ (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 171 [14 July 1869]).

retaining the true meaning of an equally disputed notion like communism,<sup>379</sup> do democracy as the rule of the people and freedom as the collective transcendence of domination not also have enduring meanings worth salvaging? Commenting on this problem of ‘central concepts of our political vocabulary’ having been ‘so corrupted that they are almost unusable’, Michael Hardt offers a perceptive response. ‘We could abandon these terms and invent new ones,’ writes Hardt, ‘but we would leave behind the long history of struggles, dreams and aspirations that are tied to them. I think it is better to fight over the concepts themselves in order to restore or renew their meaning.’<sup>380</sup> Commitment to first principles, then as now, must surely extend to this task. To disavow such concepts for the sake of maintaining at all costs their original meaning or their divisive function at a formal level (as we shall see in Chapter 3) is to concede victory to the usurpers, surrendering to their hegemonic triumphs; it is to willingly abandon the terrain on which the struggle for principles that define what is politically possible, if not what defines politics as such,<sup>381</sup> is won or lost. ‘Liberté ! Egalité ! Fraternité ! Cette devise qui brille au fronton de nos édifices, ne doit pas être une vaine décoration d’opéra’, Blanqui’s own club wrote in 1848. A politics of principles is undoubtedly at its most forceful when engaging in this struggle over meaning and thereby opening up the space for the division, choice and commitment it itself prescribes. As the club’s proclamation continues: ‘Il n’y a pas liberté quand on manque de pain. Il n’y a pas égalité, quand l’opulence fait scandale, à côté de la

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<sup>379</sup> On the meaning of the word communism for Blanqui, see ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société, *CSI*, p. 210. For Badiou, see *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2008).

<sup>380</sup> Michael Hardt, ‘The Common in Communism’, in *The Idea of Communism*, p. 131. The same could be said for historical figures – the Suffragettes, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela... - who have been appropriated by the established order and divorced from their radical politics in the process. Hardt’s own work on Thomas Jefferson serves as a good example of rediscovering the figures and ideas behind the officially sanctioned representation.

<sup>381</sup> As Rancière states: ‘Being fought over is what makes a political notion properly political as I see it, not the fact that it has multiple meanings. The political struggle is also the struggle for the appropriation of words’ (Jacques Rancière, ‘Democracies Against Democracy: An interview with Éric Hazan’, in *Democracy in what state?* [Columbia University Press: New York, 2010], p. 78).

misère. Il n'y a pas fraternité, quand l'ouvrière avec ses enfants affamés, se traine aux portes de palais.'<sup>382</sup> Blanqui fails to follow the logic of his own position to the end, seemingly abandoning a crucial question he himself once appears to pose: what do we mean by genuine freedom, equality and fraternity? Make your decision, choose your side.

Writing in the wake of the bloodshed that tore through Paris during the *semaine sanglante*, Marx concludes that 'there can be neither peace nor truce possible between the working men of France and the appropriators of their produce.'<sup>383</sup> Perhaps taking his lead from Marx, Walter Benjamin suggests that 'the Commune puts an end to the phantasmagoria holding sway over the early years of the proletariat. It dispels the illusion that the task of the proletarian revolution is to complete the work of 1789 hand in hand with the bourgeoisie. This illusion dominates the period 1831-1871, from the Lyons uprising to the Commune.'<sup>384</sup> Reworking Benjamin's formulation, Éric Hazan pushes back the shattering of the 'illusion' to the 1848 June Days, adding that 'c'est pourquoi, à la différence de juillet 1830 et de février 1848, les journées de Juin ne font pas partie des images d'Épinal de l'histoire républicaine. Car l'illusion de « la main dans la main », la bourgeoisie cherche de tout temps à l'entretenir. Le maintien de l'ordre est à ce prix, aujourd'hui comme autrefois.'<sup>385</sup> If, however, as Benjamin goes on to say, the 'bourgeoisie never shared in this error', for its 'battle against the social rights of the proletariat dates back to the great Revolution', before

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<sup>382</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 95 [22 March 1848].

<sup>383</sup> Marx, *The Civil War in France*, p. 90. Marx and Engels had acknowledged, however, in 1848 that '[i]n depicting the most general phases of the development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat' (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 49). It seems Marx was forced to return to this earlier assumption in the wake of the Commune.

<sup>384</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>385</sup> Éric Hazan, *Paris Sous Tension* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2011), p. 64.

May 1871, before June 1848, Blanqui never shared in these phantasmagorias, illusions and errors either. Blanqui's battle *for* the social rights of the proletariat dates back to *his* great revolution, July 1830. Blanqui's experience of July and its aftermath rendered any semblance of compromise, conciliation and neutrality obsolete to the point that their continued propagation was a dangerous, deceitful instrument wielded by the forces of oppression. Conflict in fact, conflict in principle, is the only maxim to which a revolutionary should subscribe. From this basic assumption Blanqui lays the groundwork for an understanding of the decisive action popular power will necessarily demand, the obstacles it will necessarily face, the subjective resources it will necessarily require. In other words, it underpins his entire political project. The role this also plays in informing his conception of the people and the proletariat is explored in the next chapter.

### Chapter 3 - The People and the Proletariat

‘La société se compose de riches et de pauvres, de puissants et de faibles, d’exploiteurs et d’exploités. Il faut choisir entre ces deux catégories. Qui pourrait hésiter ? Les supprimer toutes deux, c’est le véritable progrès à poursuivre.’<sup>386</sup>

‘Les partis peuvent se déguiser, ils ne changent pas.’<sup>387</sup>

- Votre état ?

- Prolétaire.

- Ce n’est pas là un état.

- Comment, ce n’est pas un état ! C’est l’état de 30 millions de Français qui vivent de leur travail et qui sont privés de droits politiques.<sup>388</sup>

Ranking as one of his most memorable statements, and recently receiving renewed attention thanks to Jacques Rancière’s interest in the exchange,<sup>389</sup> Blanqui’s forceful reply to the judge at the opening hearings of the *Procès des Quinze* in January 1832 not only contains all the audacity, provocation and combativeness that would continue to define his life and thought.<sup>390</sup> Blanqui’s self-identification as and with the proletariat also announces the question of agency that plays such a crucial, and by equal measure often contentious, role in his politics.

For a political project built on the basic assumption that historical change only occurs through conscious and deliberate human action, that humans are capable of shaping their own destiny through what they know and do, the question of political

<sup>386</sup> Blanqui, ‘L’impôt progressif’, 1867, *CSII*, p. 39.

<sup>387</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 71 [n.d.].

<sup>388</sup> Société des Amis du Peuple, *Procès des Quinze* (Paris: Imprimerie de Auguste Mie, 1832), p. 3.

<sup>389</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *La Mésestante* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1995), pp. 61-64; *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), pp. 118-119. Here and below, because of the particularly neologistic nature of Rancière’s terminology I have decided to refer to and quote in the original French.

<sup>390</sup> The speech could certainly be placed in the canon of politically radical defence speeches, alongside the likes of Fidel Castro’s ‘History will absolve me’ (1953) and Nelson Mandela’s ‘I am prepared to die’ (1964).

agency indeed logically follows. We have seen that Blanqui conceives politics as an irreconcilable struggle of interests and ideals. The resulting understanding of society as divided into oppressor and oppressed, exploiters and exploited, paves the way for a conception of the proletariat as a means of identifying and identifying with the exploited and their exclusion. So who or what is this group with whose interests and ideals Blanqui emphatically aligns? Is there, for Blanqui, a universal subject of history? How and when is this subject, this actor, this class, constituted? Does an oppressed class bring about the dissolution of class? Does one actor's own emancipation herald the emancipation of all? And how and when can or will this occur?

This chapter explores perhaps the most significant implication of the preceding chapter - that is, the people or the proletariat as a political notion and function of Blanqui's politics of conflict and commitment. I will begin with a general outline of the central features of Blanqui's proletariat before engaging with its reception, showing how and why the majority of previous accounts are, in my opinion, flawed and misleading. Together with Rousseau, I suggest that reading Blanqui, the so-called 'pre-Marxist', with and through two of the foremost 'post-Marxist' political theorists, Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Rancière, can in certain ways help us arrive at an understanding of the meaning his 'proletariat'. That is not to say that Marx is a redundant point of reference; though certain key differences remain, in some interesting and useful respects Blanqui and Marx's conceptions of the political actor can be broadly aligned.

### A political actor

#### *Two classes*

As we saw in Chapter 2, driven from the land and production the people are the majority of the population forced to provide for – and those exploited by – the wealthy minority of idle, parasitic usurpers who do not themselves contribute towards production yet exclusively own its means of production and exclusively benefit from its fruits.<sup>391</sup> ‘Le peuple est l’ensemble des citoyens qui travaillent’; the people names ‘la classe pauvre et laborieuse’.<sup>392</sup> In turn, this group has no representatives in power to defend its rights and interests.<sup>393</sup> Non-representation and non-recognition at the level of state and government have further consequences. ‘Nos lois actuelles sont toutes en faveur des riches,’ Blanqui argues, ‘et il ne pourrait en être autrement avec notre organisation politique ; nos législateurs ont en vue leurs intérêts, et ils sont riches ; ils ont en vue les intérêts de leurs commettants, et leur commettants sont riches’.<sup>394</sup> Designating, then, the thirty million French men and women who live from their labour and are ‘privé[s] de tous les droits de la cité’,<sup>395</sup> the proletariat is *outside* of the socio-political order; it is defined by its *exclusion*. In a system that ‘concentre les trois pouvoirs [législatif, judiciaire et exécutif] entre les mains d’un petit nombre de privilégiés unis par les mêmes intérêts’, thereby constituting ‘la plus monstrueuse des tyrannies’, the result is that ‘le prolétaire est resté en dehors’.<sup>396</sup> The proletariat is those who have no right to education, whose voice and interests are simply

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<sup>391</sup> Blanqui, ‘La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l’ont créée’, 2 February 1834, *MA*, pp. 116-118; Blanqui, ‘Qui fait la soupe doit la manger’, March 1834, *OI*, p. 291. See also Blanqui, ‘L’aristocratie et le peuple’, 23 July 1831, *OI*, p. 167.

<sup>392</sup> Blanqui, ‘Formulaire de réception de la Société des Familles’, July-August 1834, *OI*, p. 299; Blanqui, ‘De la législation’, 18 August 1831, *OI*, p. 170.

<sup>393</sup> Blanqui, ‘De la législation’, *OI*, p. 170.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>395</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, 12 January 1832, *MA*, p. 63.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.



unrecognised by the government, the legal system and the press.<sup>397</sup> As Blanqui later reaffirms in the pages of the *Critique Sociale*, the established order is comprised of ‘deux catégories’: ‘de privilégiés et de parias’.<sup>398</sup>

Immediately we are struck by at least two points. First, we see that Blanqui’s subject is an extremely wide and flexible, to not say a vague and imprecise, construction, employing catch-all terms to designate, in the broadest possible sense, the under-privileged many as distinct from the privileged few. ‘Classe’, where it appears, is not rooted in a specific social or economic position but denotes an approximate set or category of common properties or attributes – labour, impoverishment, disempowerment. Second, and directly following the first point, ‘le prolétaire’ and ‘le peuple’, along with ‘le multitude’, ‘les pauvres’, ‘les masses’, ‘les plébéiens’ and ‘les opprimés’ are employed as interchangeable synonyms, to the extent that Blanqui will switch between the terms in the course of a few lines.<sup>399</sup> Hereafter I will therefore do likewise. (We shall return to the import and consequences of these two characteristics below.)

An article from the *Journal des Débats* from 8 December 1831 gained notoriety for suggesting that the *canut* revolt in Lyon had revealed ‘un grave secret, celui de la lutte intestine qui a lieu dans la société entre la classe qui possède et celle qui ne possède pas.’ The author, Saint-Marc Girardin, continues: ‘Les barbares qui menacent la société ne sont point au Caucase, ni dans les steppes de la Tartarie ; ils sont dans les faubourgs de nos villes manufacturières. ... C’est là où est le danger de

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<sup>397</sup> See Blanqui and Hadot-Desages, ‘Propagande Démocratique’, 1835, *OI*, p. 314; Blanqui, ‘Formulaire de réception à la Société des Saisons’, 1837, *OI*, p. 382.

<sup>398</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, 1869-70, *CSI*, p. 189.

<sup>399</sup> See for example, Blanqui, ‘Loi qui interdit au peuple la faculté de lire’, 2 February 1834, *OI*, p. 273; Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, *MA*, pp. 76-77.

la société moderne ; c'est de là que peuvent sortir les barbares qui la détruiront.'<sup>400</sup>

The article seemed to articulate what many on the both sides of the political spectrum were thinking: not only the existence of a society split into two groups – the proletariat and the privileged<sup>401</sup> - but that the former were debased and depraved feral animals with 'appétits de brute' who were indeed doomed to a 'vie de brute', as Blanqui subsequently declared.<sup>402</sup>

Another significant point of reference in Blanqui's thinking here is Roman history. The people are the modern day plebe; the proletariat of Rome is the proletariat of Orléanist France. The defence speech, for instance, speaks of 'le drapeau plébéen de 1830'.<sup>403</sup> A text thought to be written just prior to the first edition of *Le Libérateur* in 1834 directly addresses the lineage between the proletariat of ancient Rome and the nineteenth-century usage of the term to designate 'l'immense majorité des Français'.<sup>404</sup> Responding to the reproach that under a regime in which all are equal before the law allusion to the Roman proletariat is an anachronistic misnomer, the text asserts that the condition of the proletariat of Rome - whose triumphs on the battlefield were only for the benefit of the patricians; who in return for completing the most grueling public works received nothing but hatred and ill treatment from the aristocracy; who were granted no political rights in return for their

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<sup>400</sup> *Journal des Débats*, Thursday 8 December 1831, p. 1. The author later commented on the affair in his memoirs: 'Je fus très-frappé [*sic*] du caractère nouveau de cette insurrection, et, en cherchant à la définir, je comparai ces ouvriers qui cherchaient à se faire place dans notre société aux barbares qui avaient autrefois envahi l'empire romain et qui sont devenus la souche des peuples modernes. Il n'y avait, dans cette comparaison, ni haine ni injure. Mais ce mot de *barbares* fut pris comme une expression de dédain ; de là, dans la plupart des journaux, une explosion d'indignation contre l'insolence du *Journal des Débats*' (Saint-Marc Girardin, *Souvenirs et réflexions politiques d'un journaliste* [Paris: Michel-Lévy frères, 1859], pp. 143-144).

<sup>401</sup> 'La société est partagée en deux classes, les prolétaires et les hommes de la propriété ; voilà ce qu'on ne cesse de répéter aujourd'hui' (*L'écho de la fabrique*, Sunday 29 April 1832, p. 1).

<sup>402</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, p. 75; Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, p. 121.

<sup>403</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, p. 76.

<sup>404</sup> 'Tout l'espoir des prolétaires est dans la République', January 1834, *OI*, p. 253. Though the text cannot be conclusively attributed to Blanqui and must be approached with this in mind, it nonetheless contains ideas formulated in his immediate intellectual environment, shedding light on this issue from his perspective, broadly speaking. See *OI*, p. 253n for information on the text.

service to the country; who were quite simply ‘rayés de la liste des hommes, et ravalés au niveau de la brute’ - is precisely the condition of the workers and peasants in Orleanist France. The proletariat of both ancient Rome and nineteenth-century France, the texts states, in terms interestingly reprised verbatim by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, ‘supportent toutes les charges de la société, sans jouir d’aucun de ses avantages.’<sup>405</sup> It is the proletariat who built society only to be excluded from it. It is the proletariat who is dehumanized to the point of having its humanity denied altogether. It is the proletariat who the self-appointed guardians of ‘la civilisation’ considered as ‘barbares’ (the text cites the *Journal des Débats* article).<sup>406</sup> The politics of Rome could indeed be transposed to contemporary political groups, interests and struggles, Blanqui again contends in 1855: ‘nous ne représentons ni les patriciens ni les prétoriens. Nous sommes leur ennemi commun, le peuple des catacombes, creusant sous leur pas le tombeau qui doit tous les engloutir.’<sup>407</sup> Blanqui’s project is aligned with the common people, with the invisible and anonymous workers, and their timeless struggle, from ancient Rome to modern France, for freedom and equality. Blanqui evokes and applies the same terms to what is in essence the contemporary manifestation of the same struggle of labour against capital with the same two adversaries, proletarians against patricians, that has defined history since ancient Rome.<sup>408</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid., p. 253; Marx and Engels cited in Michael Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), p. 113.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid., pp. 254-255. Cf. Past struggles between ‘Patriciat et Prolétariat ... sur la question politique et sociale’ correspond to ‘la situation du travailleur européen’ (Blanqui, ‘L’usure’, n.d., *CSI*, p. 47-48).

<sup>407</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 370-371 [September 1855].

<sup>408</sup> For Blanqui all facets of the plutocratic Second Empire, in which ‘[l]es ouvriers soumis à un joug de fer, sans liberté de parole ni d’action, surveillés par des yeux d’argus, expulsés au moindre symptôme d’indépendance politique, à la moindre révélation d’une pensée libre’, in which ‘le pauvre, impuissante complète de ouvrir la bouche et écrasement sous les pieds du Riche’, amount to a ‘démagogie Césarienne’ (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 151-152 [27 February 1869]).

In short, the proletariat, Blanqui believes, is seen as having no right to exist, no right to live.<sup>409</sup> This helps to explain the assertion that the people are those treated as slaves by the law,<sup>410</sup> for to be outside is to be nothing: ‘Le peuple ... n’est rien, ne compte pour rien.’<sup>411</sup> So begins a cycle of political exclusion and material suffering. Under Louis-Philippe’s ‘gouvernement des riches ... [l]e sort du prolétaire est semblable à celui du serf et du nègre, sa vie n’est qu’un long tissu de misères, de fatigues et de souffrances.’<sup>412</sup> We see that the proletariat is, in humanist terms, those who are the subject of grave injustice. In 1831 Blanqui therefore spoke of ‘l’existence de deux classes d’hommes bien distinctes, de deux grandes catégories sociales ... d’un côté les douceurs de l’abondance, les avantages de la civilisation et tous les privilèges de l’oisiveté ; de l’autre les horreurs de la misère, les maux de l’ignorance et le partage héréditaire des travaux les plus rudes, unis aux plus affreuses privations.’<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 62; Blanqui, ‘Formulaire de réception à la Société des Saisons’, *OI*, p. 382.

<sup>410</sup> Blanqui, ‘Formulaire de réception de la Société des Familles’, *OI*, p. 299.

<sup>411</sup> Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du Peuple’, 2 February 1832, *MA*, p. 93.

<sup>412</sup> Blanqui, ‘Formulaire de réception de la Société des Familles’, *OI*, p. 299.

<sup>413</sup> Blanqui, ‘L’aristocratie et le peuple’, *OI*, p. 167. It is worth recalling that Blanqui’s proletariat is generally consistent with the intellectual context of its genesis. ‘Before Marx,’ Peter Stallybrass notes, ‘*proletarian* was one of the central signifiers of the passive spectacle of poverty. In England, Dr Johnson had defined *proletarian* in his *Dictionary* (1755) as “mean; wretched; vile; vulgar”’. ‘In this sense,’ adds Laclau in light of this citation, ‘the term “proletariat” is part of a whole terminological universe which designates the poor, but a poor outside any stable social ascription’ (Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* [London: Verso, 2005] p. 143). Though, as we shall see, Blanqui will insist – to a far greater degree than Laclau – on the necessity of transforming poverty from a passive social spectacle to an active political force, his proletariat is broadly in line with this long intellectual tradition that sought to name the nameless, non-existent ‘scum’ of society, and affirm their common political agency. Blanqui directly identifies the ‘canailles’, ‘la populace’ (Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du Peuple’, *MA*, p. 88; Blanqui, ‘Adresse au gouvernement provisoire’, 20 April 1848, *MA*, p. 139; Blanqui, ‘Les massacres de Rouen. La Société républicaine centrale au gouvernement provisoire’, 2 May 1848, *MA*, p. 142; Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard’, 6 June 1852, *MA*, p. 186), those vehemently despised by and excluded from the established order with the struggle of the people. Cf. Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses* (Paris: Editions Perrin, 2007), pp. 457-458.

*France and Paris*

Three further points should be established here. First, in stark contrast to the cowardice, corruption and egoism of the bourgeoisie,<sup>414</sup> Blanqui depicts the people as the true representative of French society. Bourgeois egoism had no concern for France and would soon sell it down the river in favour of personal gain, as occurred after 1830.<sup>415</sup> In Blanqui's analysis it is not the working men who have no country, as Marx and Engels would later declare, but the commercial middle classes; the centre of finance capital, the *Bourse*, serves as the capital of the bourgeoisie.<sup>416</sup> The people therefore embody the nation. The destiny of the nation is inextricably linked to the cause and interests of the people. Moreover, though major revolutions and uprising may occur elsewhere – and such events should be actively celebrated and supported – France alone remains the true beacon of revolution. The foremost agent, the primary battlefield and combatants of revolutionary politics are found in France; the destiny of the continent as a whole is determined, in the last instance, by the political struggles in France, the microcosm and vanguard of European politics. Since the causes of 'le peuple' and 'la nation' went hand in hand Blanqui's position is therefore a double bind: to serve the nation is to serve the oppressed, to serve the oppressed is to serve the nation.

Does the nation-state mark the limit of Blanqui's conception of the people? At times a register of internationalist solidarity against a common adversary would suggest not. 'Les travailleurs de toutes les nations sont frères, et ils n'ont qu'un seul

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<sup>414</sup> See Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du Peuple', *MA*, p. 81. In the same speech Blanqui's scorn of bourgeois cowardice is also seen in his description of their state of 'une telle épouvante ... une si profonde consternation' during the *Trois Glorieuses*, when 'pâles', 'éperdus', their 'peur' and 'lâcheté' (p. 84) meant that they only reappeared once the fighting – carried out by the people – had finished (p. 86).

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>416</sup> Blanqui MSS 9586, fo. 401 [n.d.]. See also Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, p. 67; Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du Peuple', *MA*, p. 93. Cf. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 58.

ennemi, l'opprimeur qui les force à s'entr'égorguer sur les champs de bataille', concludes the *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*. 'Tous, ouvriers et paysans de France, d'Allemagne ou d'Angleterre, d'Europe, d'Asie ou d'Amérique, tous, nous avons mêmes labours, mêmes souffrances, mêmes intérêts.'<sup>417</sup> We discover therein a certain international dimension to Blanqui's political struggle, yet overall his thought on this point contains a notable degree of tension. Take the *Rapport* from 1832. At one level it speaks of two, antagonistic Europes - 'l'Europe des rois' and 'l'Europe des peuples'<sup>418</sup> - applying the same analysis to Britain as he does to France and evoking an internationally interconnected struggle between the masses and the aristocracy.<sup>419</sup> But it also seems to suggest that the European struggles are largely specific to nation-states. While forever expressing a clear interest and solidarity with the struggles engulfing the many corners of the continent, from Britain to Poland,<sup>420</sup> ultimately one cannot escape the political primacy of France within Blanqui's project. The 'people' with which Blanqui tends to be principally concerned is the French people, their universality often not extending beyond the French border.<sup>421</sup> There is no doubt that conceiving the people first and foremost in terms of a national body is important in initiating often major international political sequences, as clearly demonstrated if not by France itself in 1789 and 1848 but perhaps most clearly by the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century and again more recently during the Arab Spring. Marx and Engels are correct to argue that 'the struggle of the proletariat

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<sup>417</sup> Blanqui, 'Instructions pour une prise d'armes', 1868, *MA*, p. 291.

<sup>418</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du Peuple', *MA*, p. 99.

<sup>419</sup> See the comments on the British reaction to July 1830, *ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>420</sup> See, for example, Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, pp. 77-78; Blanqui, 'Lettre à Lelewel', 29 February 1832, *OI*, pp. 225-226.

<sup>421</sup> 'Nous n'avons point d'exemples à prendre en Angleterre,' Blanqui once claimed, 'mais seulement une plèbe opprimée à y plaindre et une oligarchie sans entrailles à y détester. Pourquoi chercher des modèles au delà des frontières ? Nos pères, il y a 70 ans, nous ouvraient la bonne route. On s'est égaré on l'abandonnant. Rentrons-y. Toute autre conduit aux fondrières' (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 277 [December 1862]). See also Blanqui, 'Lettre à Degeorges', 22 October 1844, *OI*, p. 630. Blanqui's Germanophobia became particularly pronounced during the Franco-Prussian War.

with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle',<sup>422</sup> and Blanqui's insistence on the mobilisation and empowerment of the French people is strategically astute in this respect. Yet what Blanqui lacks, arguably like Rousseau yet unlike Marx and Engels, is sufficient concern for political agency beyond the confines of the nation-state. Marx and Engels know that it is only after the proletariat acquires 'political supremacy' through constituting itself as 'the leading class of the nation' that universal emancipation can proceed. But the consequences of the first step are tied to and limited by the second; again, the experience of the twentieth century clearly demonstrates this point. 'United action, of the leading civilized countries at least, is one of the *first conditions* for the emancipation of the proletariat', the *Manifesto* states.<sup>423</sup> We might suggest that it is with the national struggle that Blanqui is primarily, if not often solely, concerned. And though such thinking is perceptive, politically speaking, it nonetheless remains a limitation.

Just as the French people take precedence within Europe, we must recall that the people of Paris take precedence within France. As we saw in Chapter 1, it is above all the people of Paris in whom Blanqui has confidence; Parisians are the revolutionary agent par excellence. The basic reason for this is worth repeating: Parisians are enlightened. The 'force principale' of the 'ouvriers parisiens' is their 'supériorité de l'intelligence et de l'adresse'.<sup>424</sup> Free from the ignorance holding sway over most of the country, the people of Paris have the concentrated collective enlightened thought, power and material resources capable of freeing France from the chains of any tyranny. Blanqui consequently accords primacy to the capital as representative and determinate of the nation as a whole.

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<sup>422</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 49.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., p. 58; emphasis added.

<sup>424</sup> Blanqui, 'Instructions pour une prise d'armes', *MA*, p. 284.

*The actor's political action*

The final point is of particular importance since it concerns the construction, emergence and continued empowerment of the people as a political actor. Referring in 1832 to the conflict between three competing groups and interests, after the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie Blanqui consciously places ‘le peuple en dernier’ because ‘il a toujours été le dernier et que je compte sur une prochaine application de la maxime de l’Évangile les derniers seront les premiers.’<sup>425</sup> Such imagery exemplifies a view of the oppressed that echoes the well-known words of *The Internationale*, ‘we are nothing, let us be everything’.<sup>426</sup> Blanqui’s conception of the people, though not an international class, nonetheless stands for those who count for nothing, those dismissed as capable of nothing. Revolution inverts this logic; it is the moment at which the people can transform from nothing to everything, proving themselves as capable of everything - of completely transforming the country, of subverting all hierarchies and established orders, of destroying all presuppositions. To become all or to remain nothing – this is, for Blanqui, the essence of revolutionary politics, as July 1830 revealed.

A truly radical intervention, an event of immense beauty and wonder, July marked the rebirth of the people, Blanqui believes, demonstrating their collective power and capacity to make and determine their own history. Blanqui often – though not always – depicts revolt as the necessary condition for the emergence and creation of the people as a political actor. In July they subverted bourgeois rule and united their oppressors against them, confirming not only the existence of the political

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<sup>425</sup> Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du Peuple’, *MA*, pp. 80-81. In stark contrast to his later vehement atheism, Blanqui readily evokes biblical imagery in some of his early writings. That is not to say that religion is not yet a target, however. Indeed the *Rapport* itself also denounces the ‘fanatisme de la religion’, declaring it necessary for Catholicism and legitimism to ‘mourir ensemble’ (p. 91).

<sup>426</sup> This phrase has generated interest recently by virtue of its evocation in the works of Badiou and Rancière. See Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 115.



conflict described above but also their agency as the true representative of French society.<sup>427</sup> The people, dormant for fifteen years, finally woke again in 1830. On Thursday 29 July, the third consecutive day of fighting in Paris, ‘le peuple est vainqueur.’<sup>428</sup> In the streets and on the barricades the last had become the first. In the wake of July the people ‘veut être quelque chose’.<sup>429</sup> Revolution is, we might say, the actualization of a latent potential or possibility.<sup>430</sup> In this respect, when speaking of ‘la force des masses’<sup>431</sup> the term ‘force’ denotes, in Blanqui’s lexis, the collective power and energy of the people as an active political agent; their force is their capacity – realised and manifested in the act of collective revolt – to create political change. It is in this sense that we should distinguish between an actor and a subject. Following the Rousseau-Jacobin tradition,<sup>432</sup> Blanqui employs the term ‘subject’ in the pejorative sense of subjection and submission to oppression. To be a subject is to be externally controlled and dominated; it is to be a constrained and passive involuntary object, and thus neither active nor self-determining. A manuscript note in which Blanqui classifies political vocabulary according to meaning and usage offers instructive clarification of this point. Blanqui first groups together synonyms of domination and disempowerment: ‘Force, violence, contrainte, oppression, asservissement, assujettissement, autorité, coaction, coercition, intolérance, joug, sujétion, tyrannie

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<sup>427</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du Peuple’, *MA*, pp. 83-85.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>430</sup> It would be wrong to think that Blanqui exclusively insists on the necessity of insurgent force as redefining the possible and the thinkable. In 1879, for instance, he notes how his election by proxy in Bordeaux ‘révèle à l’improviste la force latente qu’on croyait disparu. Le choix d’un candidat ultra-révolutionnaire, enterré vivant dans les prisons conservatistes, ne peut plus laisser de doute sur la portée de ce réveil, et de tous les points de la France un cri de joie répond au coup hardi frappé par les Bordelais.’ He thus speaks of ‘la joie commun du succès que la Révolution vient de remporter à Bordeaux. Elle n’est rien, mais l’énergique et soudain levée de ces 7000 électeurs est un événement’ (Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 456 [11 July 1879]). Such exceptional events aside, the popular capacity to exercise their collective power is, during the majority of Blanqui’s lifetime, created and can only be sustained in revolutionary upheaval, as witnessed from 1830 through 1848 to 1871.

<sup>431</sup> Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du Peuple’, *MA*, p. 85.

<sup>432</sup> On this point I follow Peter Hallward’s assertion that usage of the term ‘actor’ avoids the problem of the subject’s ‘underlying submission’. ‘Willing and able: political will and self-determination’, lecture given at the American University in Paris, 10 April 2015.

...'. These are then followed with terms for empowerment: 'Force, pouvoir, puissance, faculté, virtualité, vigueur, énergie, effort, intensité'.<sup>433</sup> What defines the latter from the former is the capacity to consciously act, the process of empowerment through determined action. Collective political action is, then, to cite Rousseau, 'the act by which a people is a people';<sup>434</sup> it is, in other words, the act that creates the actor. Hereafter I will therefore recognise this distinction in privileging the notion of the actor over that of the subject.

Blanqui knows that a political actor will not overcome its domination and disempowerment through a single, isolated act, however. It must discover ways to further empower and strengthen its initial action, to persist and advance through and beyond the rupture it itself created in order to impose its collective will and implement a new social order. The action required to sustain popular power is thus vital if the people are to truly transcend their domination. Again, for Blanqui 1830 clearly demonstrates this fact. Once the fighting had finished the bourgeoisie reappeared from hiding to grasp the reins of power, reasserting its dominance over the people. Domination, hierarchies, prescribed places and roles all returned: 'Chacun son rôle ; les hommes des ateliers s'étaient retirés, les hommes du comptoir parurent.'<sup>435</sup> Workers went back to the workshops and their prior state of non-existence. Most significantly of all the outcomes of July, 'le peuple, qui a tout fait, reste zéro comme devant.'<sup>436</sup> The revolution and the opportunity it presented - and briefly realised - was lost. Those who had done and had become everything returned to being nothing. In Blanqui's mind this gives rise to a crucial question: why was this awakening and

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<sup>433</sup> Blanqui MSS 9591(1), fo. 90, 92 [n.d.]. 'Le Capital', Blanqui explains in one example of this distinction, 'veut avoir raison de l'audace de ses sujets, et en finir avec ces associations qui ont osé mettre une borne à sa puissance' (Blanqui, 'Saint-Étienne: Lutte entre les fabricants et les ouvriers', December 1849, *CSII*, p. 228).

<sup>434</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 54.

<sup>435</sup> See Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', *MA*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

initial popular victory not sustained and ultimately triumphant? How could one account for the hijacking and betrayal of ‘notre révolution’,<sup>437</sup> for the rupture between the immediate achievements and long-term possibilities of July and the realities of its aftermath?<sup>438</sup> Blanqui seems to reason that true politics, revolutionary politics, is at once a triumphant opportunity and a perilous uncertainty. The task, therefore, is to conserve and secure the former in order to eliminate the latter, to remove the gap or distance between what is and what should have been so as to ensure that a revolution is indeed a revolution. It is a question that will underpin Blanqui’s entire political project: how to be, how to remain, victorious. Crucial to such thinking is maintaining a belief in the possible. In spite of the realities of Orléanist rule and the people’s continued marginalisation, in July ‘un fait terrible s’est accompli’, Blanqui asserts. ‘Le peuple est entré brusquement comme un coup de tonnerre sur la scène politique qu’il a enlevée d’assaut et, bien que chassé presque au même instant, il n’en a pas moins fait acte de maître, il a repris sa démission.’<sup>439</sup> To qualify the unexpected creation and emergence of the people as the primary accomplishment or ‘revelation’ of the revolution - July is hailed as ‘une révélation si soudaine et si redoutable de la force des masses’<sup>440</sup> - displays a conviction that unanticipated outcomes should not invalidate revolutionary politics or the potential it holds. The promise of the end of bourgeois rule and the accession of popular rule may ultimately have been cruelly inverted, resulting in a bourgeois despotism, greater suffering for the people and

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>438</sup> Here are the key passages: ‘citoyens, comment se fait-il qu’une révélation si soudaine et si redoutable de la force des masses soit demeurée stérile ? Par quelle fatalité cette révolution, faite par le peuple seul et qui devait marquer la fin du règne exclusif de la bourgeoisie ainsi que l’avènement de la puissance populaire, n’a-t-elle eu d’autre résultat que d’établir le despotisme de la classe moyenne, d’aggraver la misère des ouvriers et des paysans, et de plonger la France un peu plus avant dans la boue ? ... Comment imaginer aussi que la révolution ne serait pas une révolution, que l’expulsion des Bourbons ne serait pas l’expulsion des Bourbons, que le renversement de la Restauration serait une nouvelle édition de la Restauration?’ (ibid., pp. 85, 95).

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>440</sup> Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple’, *MA*, p. 85.

further national decline. But in the face of incredulity, despondency and apparent defeat Blanqui's voice is one of enduring belief. That the revolution did not remain a revolution must not give way to disillusionment with the original act. What occurred in the more basic act of revolution itself is the confirmation of a possibility. That the last became the first, the slave became the master, the oppressed became the emancipated, however ephemeral such a transformation may ultimately have been, commands a continued confidence and an unwavering commitment to re-actualizing and then imposing this potential, which means discovering and harnessing the capacities to do so.

'Rien', 'en dehors', 'pauvres', 'souffrances', 'force', 'tout' – we can now begin to piece together some of the basic defining traits of Blanqui's actor. The proletariat or the people are the ordinary or common people, the anonymous masses without wealth, education, property or power. Born to work, to suffer, to die, the people have nothing, they count for nothing, they are nothing. Yet through their collective political action they prove themselves capable of doing and becoming everything. This group is not objectively constituted through its *a priori* inscription within the socio-economic structure but is above all created through the conscious act of political struggle. The gap between nothing and everything, between outside and in, can only be eliminated through sustained collective political action and the conditions it itself creates.

### *Interpretations*

Before advancing my own view as to how we should conceptualise Blanqui's use of these notions, it is instructive to first see how others have interpreted Blanqui's proletariat, for just as the judge responded with incredulity to Blanqui's provocative

use of ‘proletarian’ many others have since followed suit. Blanqui’s proletariat is indeed a contentious construction. The common line of criticism is that, since Blanqui’s understanding of the constitution of the proletariat particularly as expressed during the trial clearly has no bearing on the reality of contemporary socio-economic conditions, it is mere restatement of the eighteenth-century idea of the ‘people’, owing more to the ‘unsophisticated Babouvist dichotomy of “rich and poor”’ than representing a harbinger of the modern combatant in the class struggle of History, ‘a true industrial proletariat’.<sup>441</sup> For V. P. Volguine, Blanqui’s proletariat designates ‘le travailleur en général’; Blanqui ascribes it ‘le même sens que les démocrates donnaient à la notion de « peuple », in which ‘l’opposition entre « l’aristocratie de la richesse et le peuple » ou bien entre « la bourgeoisie et le peuple » - a characteristic of contemporary social thought – attested to an ‘imprécision dans les termes’ that ‘reflétait le niveau insuffisant du développement capitaliste en France, le non-achèvement de l’évolution industrielle’ and leading Blanqui to confuse ‘prolétaire’ and ‘pauvres’. Such shortcomings are, Volguine goes on to observe, symptomatic of a crude analysis of capitalism in which capital is synonymous with usury (profit derives from the inequality of exchange), and capitalism is principally critiqued in terms of moral and rational judgment (capitalism is incompatible with justice and logical reason). It follows for Volguine that Blanqui’s ‘petit bourgeois’ analysis of exploitation – which is ‘profondément erronée’ and rooted in the conflation of ‘prolétariat’ with all social groups living from their labour - is unable to understand the class structure of capitalist society.<sup>442</sup>

As regards the thirty million proletarians depicted in the defence speech, affirming that ‘neither the term nor the number could withstand economic analysis’

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<sup>441</sup> Roger Garaudy and Arthur Rosenberg cited in Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 96.

<sup>442</sup> V.P. Volguine, ‘Les idées politiques et sociales de Blanqui’, pp. 10, 33-34.

Bernstein joins Volguine in believing the conception of social classes offered in the *Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple* to be poorly defined, ‘schematic and superficial’.<sup>443</sup> Bernstein notes that the ‘prerequisite situation of a revolution’ is something that ‘forever escaped his analysis’. In Bernstein’s eyes, such an analytical limitation owes to the basic fact that Blanqui ‘could not get inside the economic structure to study its dynamics’. Consequently, while a ‘romantic rebel’ and a ‘Titan of revolt’, Blanqui’s ‘weapons were museum pieces’, leaving him ‘poorly equipped to give history a push.’<sup>444</sup> Philippe Vigier, meanwhile, suggests that Blanqui never offered a ‘rigorous’ definition of his conception of the proletariat, and the term could certainly not apply to his social background.<sup>445</sup> It therefore falls to Alan Spitzer to reveal that while such interpretations are validated by some of Blanqui’s writings, particularly the eighteenth-century-influenced conception of ‘the people’, ‘there is considerable material which shows that Blanqui’s idea of “the people” contains implications beyond the vague democratic dichotomy of “the many and the few.”’<sup>446</sup> Spitzer then goes on to offer a concise overview of the development of Blanqui’s thinking on class and class struggle that is particularly useful in understanding this issue and so worth our consideration before we proceed.

Ideas expressed in the defence speech, for example, ‘contain the germs of a fairly sophisticated theory of historical development based upon the conflict of economic and social classes’, Spitzer observes.<sup>447</sup> But Blanqui’s analyses in both the defence speech and the *Rapport* after it ‘[do] not define in economic terms the social

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<sup>443</sup> Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection*, pp. 48-49; V.P. Volguine, ‘Les idées politiques et sociales de Blanqui’, p. 15.

<sup>444</sup> Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection*, p. 49.

<sup>445</sup> Philippe Vigier, ‘Préface’, *OI*, p. 18.

<sup>446</sup> Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 97.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98. Spitzer sees this in the assertion: ‘Il me semble que c’est là, sous une nouvelle forme et entre d’autres adversaires, la guerre des barons féodaux contre les marchands qu’ils détroussaient sur les grands chemins’ (Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 64).

categories of “bourgeois” and “proletarian” whose conflict was to decide the political configurations of the future.’ Spitzer thus draws readers’ attention to the writings from *Le Libérateur* in which one discovers the first allusions to exploited workers, ownership of the instruments of production and the antagonism between wages and profits. It is only here, then, that Blanqui begins to describe his subject under the rubric of socio-economics so as to produce a ‘somewhat clearer statement of the economic relations among the contending classes.’<sup>448</sup>

In the letter to Maillard Blanqui sets out a more ‘precise’ definition of the two opposing groups of proletariat and bourgeoisie, Spitzer suggests. Blanqui describes the existence of a class that, though less clearly defined than the nobility or clergy, is nonetheless distinct and known by the name of the ‘classe bourgeoise’.

Elle comprend la plupart des individus possédant une certaine somme d’aisance et d’instruction : financiers, négociants, propriétaires, avocats, médecins, gens de foi, fonctionnaires, rentiers, tous gens vivant de leurs revenus ou de l’exploitation des travailleurs. Joignez-y un assez bon nombre de campagnards qui ont de la fortune mais point d’éducation, et vous atteindrez un chiffre maximum de quatre millions d’individus peut-être. Restent trente-deux millions de prolétaires, sans propriété, ou du moins sans propriétés sérieuses, et ne vivant que du maigre produit de leurs bras.<sup>449</sup>

The thirty-two million proletarians Blanqui evokes here, as in the defence speech, ‘would still have included a small proportion of industrial workers and an overwhelming majority of those *petit bourgeois* elements which Marx considered

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-100.

<sup>449</sup> Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard’, *MA*, p. 177. Spitzer cites this passage *ibid.*, p. 101.

essentially reactionary', Spitzer notes, 'the peasant proprietors, petty functionaries, shopkeepers, and self-employed artisans, who, after all, were "the people" evoked by any good Jacobin.'<sup>450</sup> After elaborating on the concept in his post-1832 work, however, Blanqui's proletariat 'is no longer equivalent to "the people" of the eighteenth-century reformers. This honorable title he now bestows upon the "class of the workers" to distinguish them from the "third estate"'.<sup>451</sup> This brings Spitzer to his concluding remarks, which are worth quoting in full: 'When he applies this distinction to an analysis of contemporary political conflict, and especially when he relates it to control over the instruments of labor he has come quite close to the Marxian conception of class. However, the Soviet historian, Volgin [*sic*], has correctly observed that the clearest distinction made by Blanqui is between the class which lives by exploitation and the class which supports itself without exploiting others. This is by no means the same as the basic Marxist dichotomy between the swelling mass of wage laborers and the dwindling number of those who reap the surplus values of the workers' industry through their control over the means of production.'<sup>452</sup> Later Spitzer offers what seems to be his overall assessment: 'Blanqui's conception of the relations between the class struggle and revolutionary politics is worked out with a heavy emphasis upon voluntarist and intellectual factors and virtually no reference to the long-run political potential of the industrial proletariat viewed as a specific socio-economic group. Blanqui's Parisian workers are virtually indistinguishable from "the people" of Jacobin mythology'.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>450</sup> Ibid., pp. 101-102

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., p. 102. This can be seen to follow on from Spitzer's earlier insistence that Blanqui 'lacked the theoretical equipment to define clearly his "socialism"' (ibid., p. 95).

<sup>453</sup> 'Sociologically,' Spitzer continues, 'the proletarian elements of "this Parisian folk" were not, in the nineteenth century, equivalent to the factory proletariat of an industrial center such as Lyons. ... Although Blanqui saw political promise in the early struggles of the Lyons proletariat, his conception of a revolutionary elite was always focused on the Paris of artisans and intellectuals.' (ibid., pp. 165-166).



One can certainly agree with many of the assertions Spitzer puts forward in a sensitive reading of this point. But let us take a step back. In the first instance, to adopt rigid sociological or economic criteria – classical Marxian or otherwise – as either the stick with which to beat every facet of Blanqui's thought as 'vague', 'unrigorous', 'unsophisticated' and 'unscientific', or equally as the position from which to defend it against such critiques is to miss the point - and interest - of Blanqui's project. Blanqui's thought is not and never has been a means of gaining empirical insight. By such standards, arguably much of his work will appear crude and intellectually inadequate, which it undoubtedly does to many readers; this certainly goes a long way in accounting for why Blanqui has lacked serious, critical study for so long. But should this be the last word on the matter? Why is Blanqui's thought, and particularly the eighteenth-century usage of 'the people', or indeed 'the proletariat', 'the plebe', 'the multitude' for that matter, as an equivalent of 'the poor' or 'the oppressed', only valid when it becomes 'quite close to the Marxian conception of class', as Spitzer claims, or completely invalid precisely because it fails to meet this criterion, as Bernstein, Volguine and the other readers cited above believe? Is Blanqui's proletariat, even if - or perhaps precisely because - it is synonymous with the people in a Jacobin or voluntarist sense, really of no value?

*From socio-economic to political reasoning*

There are, I would suggest, two possible responses to this issue. It could be said that close reading in fact reveals a conception of the proletariat or the people that has a bearing on six inter-related domains: the strictly political (state power, self-governance), the judicial (rights, laws), the economic (ownership of the instruments of production, wages and remuneration), the material (well-being), the public sphere

(voice) and the cerebral (education, enlightened thought). Blanqui's actor is at present dispossessed and excluded from or exploited within each domain; as such, social revolution will bring about an order of equality in which the people can exercise self-rule over or prosper within each domain, as attested to by the respective programmes of the *Société des Familles* and its successor the *Société des Saisons*.<sup>454</sup> In accounting for Blanqui's interest in the actor and its relation to state power, education and the public sphere *alongside* economic relations and material conditions, we begin to see how the purely economic lens through which Blanqui's proletariat has been read, and in turn dismissed, is inadequate, failing to capture a conception of the actor that is neither purely economic nor determined by the economy in the last instance. Given, however, that Blanqui never precisely enumerates these demands or seeks to define their specific content, attempting to extract such a conceptual framework or unified typology is unsatisfactory and, moreover, when pursued to its logical end can but only lead back to a form of positivist rejection like those cited above. A different approach is required. To paraphrase Ernesto Laclau, hitherto readers have remained solely concerned with the *socio-economic content* Blanqui's actor expresses (or indeed fails to express), rather than considering why that *political form* of expression is necessary. Rather than focusing on the conceptual content of Blanqui's actor, which unquestionably lacks systematic exposition, can we not approach Blanqui's actor from a different perspective, one which can in fact account for the wider, more flexible conception of the revolutionary actor?

Laclau's own work on populism forms a stimulating point of comparison in this regard, offering insight by way of contrast as well as providing some routes out of the blind alleys in which Blanqui has been left. To summarise the main features of

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<sup>454</sup> See Blanqui, 'Formulaire de réception de la Société des Familles', 1834, *OI*, pp. 298-300; Blanqui, 'Formulaire de réception à la Société des Saisons', 1837, *OI*, pp. 381-384.

Laclau's thought that concern us here, Laclau's theoretical point of departure is the struggle for hegemony within a heterogeneous social field, and not the class struggle inscribed in the internal logic of objective social processes of orthodox Marxism. When a series of specific demands – be they for public services, civil rights or basic social provisions – are coherently linked and articulated together to form an 'equivalential chain' a popular identity, the people, is produced. As the people, like the content of their demands, is not 'objectively' created by a pre-given social order, one must 'conceive the "people" as a *political* category, not as a *datum* of the social structure. This designates not a *given* group, but an act of institution that creates a new agency out of a plurality of heterogeneous elements.'<sup>455</sup> For Laclau it is not a question of locating the positive content of the popular demands themselves but of the basic formal function of their collective articulation – that is, first, the construction of a universal political subject that transcends the actual content of the initial demands through which it emerged and, second, the creation of an antagonistic frontier within the social field between the two (necessarily heterogeneous) forces of the 'people' and the 'enemy'. 'This division presupposes', Laclau explains, 'the presence of some privileged signifiers which condense in themselves the signification of a whole antagonistic camp (the "regime", the "oligarchy", the "dominant groups", and so on, for the enemy; the "people", the "nation", the "silent majority" and so on, for the oppressed underdog – these signifiers acquire this articulating role according, obviously, to a contextual history).'<sup>456</sup> One of Laclau's crucial moves is to privilege form over content, to contemplate not 'systems of ideas *qua* ideas' but 'their performative dimensions', from which follows the importance of signifiers, metaphors and rhetoric in the construction of political identities, if not of politics as

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<sup>455</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 224; emphasis in original.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

such.<sup>457</sup> Naming a universality, the people, is, for Laclau, the political act *par excellence*.

To place Laclau alongside Blanqui is to be confronted with some marked - and therefore illuminating and instructive - differences. Limiting myself to the most obvious points, first and foremost, for Blanqui the people is created above all through its conscious thought, its active will, its actual power, rather than merely through the representative function of collective signifiers. Blanqui does place importance on naming an otherwise unnamed group and representing the unrepresented, as we have seen above and will again see below, but this is with the view to initiating or sustaining the process that will bring about their active empowerment. Rhetoric and signifiers thus anticipate the beginning of (or supplement an ongoing) actual political struggle, and are in no way its substitute or endpoint. Though the question of representation is a complex one on which Blanqui and Laclau share certain similar limitations (an issue to which we shall return in Chapter 4), Blanqui would nonetheless emphatically oppose Laclau's assertion that naming 'a series of *heterogeneous* elements as "working class" ... performatively brings about the unity of those elements, whose coalescence into a single entity is nothing other than the result of the operation of naming'.<sup>458</sup> For Blanqui, by contrast, and this leads on from the first point, unity is not a 'performative act' produced as a result of naming a passive object. Unity is created through the actor's deliberate and actual act of association, as Rousseau states before him.<sup>459</sup> Blanqui would dismiss any concession

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid., pp. 14, 18-19

<sup>458</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 183; emphasis in original.

<sup>459</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 17-18. 'Immediately,' Rousseau writes, 'this act of association produces, in place of the individual persons of every contracting party, a moral and collective body ... which, by the same act, is endowed with its unity, its common self, its life, and its will' (Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 56).

to the ‘precarious unity’<sup>460</sup> of Laclau’s popular force as a matter of course. Blanqui certainly shares in advancing a *socially* heterogeneous actor insofar as the people come from an extremely wide social base.<sup>461</sup> Yet if this heterogeneity is not overcome by strict *political* unity, by a shared commitment to a common purpose, the only certainty is defeat and failure. As June 1848 proved to Blanqui beyond any doubt, without concrete unity, organisation and discipline popular victory is inconceivable, popular power an impossible dream.<sup>462</sup> One could also note Blanqui’s assertion that the tendency during revolutionary sequences for the struggle of opposing camps to intensify gives rise to a sharp polarization of the political field, at which point any initial social heterogeneity is rendered inconsequential as everyone is forced to choose their side and commit to a cause, uniting with their allies and confronting their adversaries. In every instance, however, these choices and commitments are grounded above all in actual, not nominal, political practices.

If these differences help us to delineate key facets of Blanqui’s thinking, I do not think by extension they altogether exclude Laclau from aiding our understanding of Blanqui’s political actor. Laclau’s notion of an actor not as ‘pure class actors ... defined by precise locations within the relations of production’ but as a formal political logic that cuts across specific, sectorial agents to designate, in consciously broad terms, ‘the outsiders of the system, the underdogs’ remains particularly useful.<sup>463</sup> Indeed, we can see how Blanqui’s similar use of an interchangeable signifier follows the same logic: insofar as ‘proletariat’, ‘people’, ‘poor’, ‘multitude’, ‘masses’ and so on all carry for Blanqui the same basic concepts and lived realities – dispossession, exclusion, domination, oppression, exploitation – the strict socio-

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>461</sup> This heterogeneous composition is also acknowledged by Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 168.

<sup>462</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Instructions pour une prise d’armes’, *MA*, p. 262.

<sup>463</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 122, 150.

economic sense of each term or each supposedly differentiated group it designates is of little importance compared with their commonly ascribed political meaning and use.

More generally, one cannot but be struck by the similarity between Blanqui's conception of the people, the rationale behind its multiple criticisms and some of the reasoning informing Laclau's exposition of populism. Is it not also the case with Blanqui that, since his proletariat has been depicted merely in terms of its "vagueness", "imprecision", "intellectual poverty" ... there is no way of determining its *differentia specifica* in positive terms', as Laclau asserts apropos of populism?<sup>464</sup> In order to overcome this impasse Laclau proposes the full assumption of those very, supposedly pejorative, characteristics as the basic condition of politics as such. The 'simplification' or 'condensation' of the complex social field and political space into a basic dichotomy between two imprecise poles of the people and the oligarchy, the toiling masses and the exploiters (Laclau's examples), the oppressed and the oppressor, the worker and the idler (Blanqui's further dichotomies), should not be dismissed out of hand as politically naïve and immature but instead be seen as an essential political operation. As Laclau explains, 'there is in these dichotomies, as in those which constitute any politico-ideological frontier, a simplification of the political space (all social singularities tend to group themselves around one or the other of the poles of the dichotomy), and the terms designating both poles have necessarily to be imprecise (otherwise they could not cover all the particularities that they are supposed to regroup.)' The question arises: rather than a symptom of political marginality or immaturity 'is not this logic of simplification, and of making some

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

terms imprecise, the very condition of political action?’<sup>465</sup> Though Laclau is at pains to strictly differentiate his own schema from that of Marxian thought, we might in fact note that the authors of the *Communist Manifesto*, particularly in that very text, follow the same logic of reduction in the face of ostensibly complex social relations to present a struggle that over time polarizes into bourgeoisie against proletariat, oppressors against oppressed.<sup>466</sup> Rousseau, too, had previously maintained that society can be basically divided into two contesting groups: rich and poor, strong and weak, conqueror and conquered. Of course, it goes without saying that the respective accounts by which Rousseau (usurpation, theft), Marx and Engels (capitalism) and Laclau (hegemony) arrive at these dichotomies are totally at odds, and the comparison is ultimately limited for this reason. Yet in all cases the practical political exigencies behind it nonetheless remain almost identical. Placing primacy on political action compels us to redefine the nature and scope of the political more generally; it reveals how broad, antagonistic dichotomies are inevitable in and thus crucial to any militant politics, from Rousseau’s time to our own.

Blanqui willingly and explicitly carries out this form of political simplification. Anyone who opposes free and compulsory education, for example – a decisive issue in Blanqui’s eyes – is ‘un agent du jésuitisme’ and therefore an accessory to oppression, no matter what their purported political label or convictions.<sup>467</sup> With regards to the function of popular demands, one could say that it is also in this sense of condensing and dividing the political space through specific demands that one can read the injunction of 1848: ‘Du travail et du pain ! L’existence

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid., p. 18. See also pp. 98-99.

<sup>466</sup> ‘Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses ... this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat’ (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 35).

<sup>467</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, pp. 180-181.

du peuple ne peut rester à la merci des frayeurs des rancunes du capital !'<sup>468</sup> In 1917, Laclau suggests, since 'peace, bread and land were not the *conceptual* common denominator of all Russian social demands' it stands that 'grievances which had nothing to do with those three demands nevertheless expressed themselves through them', hence their necessary 'imprecision' and 'vagueness'.<sup>469</sup> Blanqui's call for work and bread is likewise at once a specific demand owing to the specific circumstances of 1848 - in which, as Blanqui described from the dungeons of Vincennes, '[l]a fermeture des ateliers, le retrait des capitaux, la suppression du travail jettent le prolétaire sur le pavé'<sup>470</sup> - *and* the condensed expression of the entire political conflict in France between the two antagonistic forces of 'the people' and 'capital', thereby enabling it to transcend the specificity of the initial demand and take on a universal dimension. Since the failure to provide work and bread is a structural imperative of the established order, their articulation as a simple demand calls into question the entire social edifice as such and the structural position therein of those to whom they and other such basic necessities are denied. As a universal political operation, to demand bread and work is to challenge by extension the structure of social relations based on exploitation and domination; one particular demand can therefore show how 'capital' is inherently and invariably at odds with 'the people', how so long as an order reigns in which the existence of the people is dependent on its continued subjugation to capital the people will not thrive, they will not exist.

The 'multitude', 'proletarians' are, for Blanqui, those who are external to the community,<sup>471</sup> those who do not exist in the eyes of the status quo because they

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<sup>468</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 95 [22 March 1848].

<sup>469</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 97-98. As Laclau explains: 'While it remains a particular demand, it also becomes the signifier of a wider universality' (ibid., p. 95).

<sup>470</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 465 [23 September 1848].

<sup>471</sup> Cf. Louis Chevalier's observation that '[l]'attitude des populations bourgeoises envers les classes laborieuses emprunte ainsi la plupart de ses caractères à l'attitude ancienne envers une population qui



*cannot* be internal to or exist within the status quo as such; their very existence is inherently antagonistic to the established order such that the structural functioning and existence of the status quo presupposes and demands their nonexistence and exclusion. Blanqui's only apparent 'crime', he thus states at two trials, is to expose this structural antagonism. Just as his defence speech of 1832 opens with the declaration '[j]e suis accusé d'avoir dit à trente millions de Français, prolétaires comme moi, qu'ils avaient le droit de vivre', again in 1849 he challenges the court in Bourges to identify the 'crimes' he supposedly committed on 17 March at the Hôtel de Ville and 16 Avril at the Champ de Mars of the previous year. 'Ai-je pris les armes, lancé les masses sur le gouvernement, tenté une Révolution ? Vous savez bien que non. Les masses réunies ce jour-là sur la place publique, ne paraissaient un trouble que par leur grande multitude.'<sup>472</sup> Again, particularly in this last citation and the event to which it refers, we see how Laclau, for his part, fails to offer any clear indication as to how rhetoric relates to or translates into concrete collective action and popular empowerment. For Blanqui, the proletariat, the multitude, through the affirmation in word but above all in deed of its mere existence challenges the entire socio-political structure in which it does not exist. So follows the task to go from exclusion from to constitution of power. On this decisive point, as well as Laclau Blanqui can also be seen to highlight the limitations of Martin Breugh's recent history of what he calls the 'plebeian experience'. Following many of the salient assumptions of Rancière's political thought, in plebeian politics Breugh not only recognises but fully endorses a logic of momentary disruption or rupture, of 'an

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était considérée comme n'appartenant pas à la ville, comme suspecte de tous les crimes, de tous les maux, de toutes les épidémies, de toutes les violences, non seulement par ses caractères propres, mais par ce seul fait de son origine extérieure à la ville' (Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses*, p. 460).

<sup>472</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, p. 62; Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 396 [n.d.].

irruptive event that temporarily fractures the order of domination. The plebeian experience per se', Breaugh therefore suggests, 'cannot be sustained for any length of time.' Because of its necessary 'impermanence', only 'traces' of the plebeian experience remain, forming a "discontinuous" history of political freedom'.<sup>473</sup> Both politically and intellectually Breaugh's analysis is very much a product of its time. The aversion to leadership and organisation, the emphasis on direct action, the transient freedom of the carnivalesque experience, the dismissal of sustained power – are these not the dominant motifs of political praxis today, as seen most clearly in the Occupy movements? It is here that a return to Blanqui becomes all the more pertinent and all the more necessary. Blanqui is right to insist that without forms of leadership and organisation, without the continuous and sustained seizure and exercise of power, the plebeian outsiders, whenever and wherever they appear, will forever remain incapable of transcending their exclusion and domination, as they can and must. The horizon of collective political action must extend beyond mere rupture with the order of domination; the possibility of the empowerment and emancipation of the dominated is subject to their overcoming the order of domination as such.

Blanqui always begins with a basic assumption: the timeless struggle of the poor and powerless many versus the rich and powerful few. 'L'aristocratie : les fleurs. Le peuple – le fumier qui les faits pousser – système des sociétés depuis des siècles.'<sup>474</sup> All these broad, imprecise concepts – capital, labour, patrician, proletariat – and their analogous application as analytical models of both ancient Rome and nineteenth-century France attest to a thought more political than economic, more Jacobin than Marxist. Neither strict sociological classification nor empirical economic

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<sup>473</sup> Martin Breaugh, *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom*, trans. Lazar Lederhendler (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. xx-xxiii.

<sup>474</sup> Blanqui MSS 9582, fo. 14 [n.d.]; Blanqui MSS 9584(2), fo. 20 [n.d.].

analysis, Blanqui's proletariat is a political construction, a political actor.<sup>475</sup> The proletariat is employed to expose inequality and injustice, to articulate the empowering process by which this inequality and injustice is actually redressed, to name those whose collective political action actually does so. The proletariat is both the call to and the result of political action. The proletariat is both a political idea and a political reality.

Does, then, the same knowing, retrospective dismissal of an 'immature' politics indicative of 'underdeveloped' socio-economic relations highlighted by Laclau not apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Blanqui's critics? And does this not similarly deny or obfuscate the universal features of Blanqui's politics? In other words, if socio-economic reasoning confines Blanqui to pre-capitalist nineteenth-century France, political reasoning can elevate him to a timeless, universal plane. It is in the insistence on the political, on the primacy of political form over social content, on the antagonistic division delineating a struggle between two opposing camps, that Laclau can help us understand Blanqui. And it is according to a necessarily imprecise, antagonistic political logic in which formal function takes primacy over socio-economic content that Blanqui's proletariat can be described, and valorized, as a political actor. Blanqui, we have already said, fails to convincingly account for the historical grounds on which political action is exercised. But it is nonetheless in his analysis of the action itself, of how the actor acts and the extent to which these collective subjective forces, and not immutable objective processes, have the collective capacity to ultimately determine and change social arrangements, that the power of his thinking still resonates.

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<sup>475</sup> 'Le nom de prolétaire dans la bouche de Blanqui n'a pas une portée sociologique', Bensaïd concisely explains, 'il ne cherche pas à faire des statistiques. C'est une proclamation politique' (Daniel Bensaïd, 'Entretien avec Daniel Bensaïd et Eric Hazan sur le recueil de textes d'Auguste Blanqui *Maintenant il faut des armes*', Emissions *Là-bas si j'y suis* de Daniel Mermet sur France-Inter, 12 February 2007 <<http://danielbensaid.org/Auguste-Blanqui?lang=fr>>).

### Blanqui with Rancière

Unlike the majority of Blanqui's readers, Jacques Rancière approaches Blanqui as a resolutely political thinker, Blanqui's proletariat as a political concept, its usage as a political intervention. In so doing, Rancière - whose conception of politics also shares certain key features and concerns with that of Laclau, a point the latter notes himself<sup>476</sup> - avoids many of the analytical misadventures of those addressed earlier, providing a thought-provoking interpretation of many of the fundamental issues at stake in this discussion. I would now like to engage with Rancière's account, showing both its insights and how they align with or supplement our analysis so far, but also where I think it is misleading and requires reconsideration.

#### *Counting the uncouneted*

Rancière's interest lies in the exchange cited at the beginning of this chapter between Blanqui and the judge. For Rancière the disagreement over the meaning of 'proletarian' marks the point at which the unequal established order, what Rancière calls the 'police', embodied in this case by the judge, and the radical equality of revolutionary politics, embodied here by Blanqui, come into conflict and thereby create a political subject. Rancière explains: 'Du point de vue policier, le procureur avait raison : prolétaire n'est pas un métier, et Blanqui n'était pas ce qu'on appelle habituellement un travailleur. Mais au point de vue politique, c'est Blanqui qui avait raison : prolétaire n'est pas le nom d'un groupe social sociologiquement indentifiable. C'est le nom d'un hors-compte, d'un *outcast*. En latin, *proletarii* veut simplement dire

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<sup>476</sup> See Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 244-249.

: ceux qui se reproduisent, ceux qui simplement vivent et se reproduisent sans posséder ni transmettre un nom, sans être comptés comme partie dans la constitution symbolique de la cité.’<sup>477</sup> In self-identifying as a proletariat, Blanqui avows an affiliation not to an occupation or to an existing social group or class, Rancière argues, but to a collective that forms ‘la classe des incomptés qui n’existe que dans la déclaration même par laquelle ils se comptent comme ceux qui ne sont pas comptés.’<sup>478</sup> Blanqui’s proletariat is as such a radically egalitarian – and so a properly political – intervention: it asserts the equality of the non-existent part of a community whose founding ‘wrong’ is precisely that part’s non-existence.<sup>479</sup> Since the non-recognition of this class or part is the fundamental injustice or wrong inscribed in the status quo, Blanqui’s proletariat, in subjectifying this wrong, creates ‘un sujet du tort’, Rancière writes. ‘Blanqui inscrit, sous le nom de prolétaires, les incomptés dans l’espace où ils sont comptables comme incomptés.’<sup>480</sup> It is in this sense that the proletariat, as suggested earlier, is not a class in the sense of having recognised social function.<sup>481</sup> The proletariat names those who have no name; it gives a voice to those who have no voice. Blanqui’s naming and voicing serves to recognise the hitherto unrecognised exclusion of the nameless and the voiceless. Rancière foregrounds the manner in which Blanqui’s proletariat, like the Athenian *demos*, names and thus subjectifies those masses who have ‘no share’, who have ‘no part’ in the whole of the

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<sup>477</sup> Rancière, *Aux bords du politique*, pp. 118-119. See also *La Mésestente*, p. 62. Cf. Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>478</sup> Rancière, *La Mésestente*, p. 62. Rancière repeats: ‘Le prolétariat n’a, avant le tort que son nom expose, aucune existence comme partie réelle de la société’ (ibid., p. 64).

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>481</sup> ‘Des « vraies » classes,’ Rancière writes, ‘cela veut dire – voudrait dire – des parties réelles de la société, des catégories correspondant à ses fonctions’ (ibid., p. 39). In the ‘police’ sense, then, class denotes a particular group of people with a particular status and position that is assigned according to one’s origins, caste even, or professional activity. Class in the political sense, by contrast, is ‘un opérateur du litige, un nom pour compter les incomptés, un mode de subjectivation en surimpression sur toute réalité des groupes sociaux’ (ibid., p. 121)

community;<sup>482</sup> it names those ordinary people ‘en dehors’, to use Blanqui’s own term, of the socio-political space yet who, when active and empowered, collectively represent society as a whole. They, the excluded, are nothing but can, and must, stand for everything.

On this last issue of active empowerment, however, we confront a limit of Rancière’s account to which we shall shortly return but that would benefit from some initial observations here. By ‘subjectivation’ Rancière means ‘la production par une série d’actes d’une instance et d’une capacité d’énonciation qui n’étaient pas identifiable dans un champ d’expérience donné, dont l’identification donc va de pair avec reconfiguration du champ de l’expérience.’ Thinking principally in terms of sense and perception, Rancière discerns in Blanqui’s proletarian subjectification one of many ‘expériences singulières du litige sur la parole et la voix, sur le partage du sensible.’ The ‘scène de parole’ in the courtroom of January 1832 is thus notable, according to Rancière’s political aesthetics, for being ‘l’une des premières occurrences politiques du sujet prolétaire moderne’.<sup>483</sup> For Blanqui himself, however, this is surely not the case. Proletariat is the name of the political force that actually appeared as a collective political actor and drove the revolution in July 1830 before by and large returning to dormant inaction. Proletarian nomination is, for Blanqui, meaningless and inconsequential without proletarian empowerment.

### *Division and unity*

Blanqui’s proletariat is, Rancière shows us, at once an assertion of recognition of and solidarity with the excluded as equal subjects, and a forceful attack on the order which denies that very existence and so denies that very equality. As Laclau writes

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., pp. 59, 61.

following Rancière, the proletariat stands for ‘the universality of the partial and the partiality of the universal.’<sup>484</sup> To reopen and expose this otherwise dismissed or obscured structural division and the injustice it carries is precisely the political function of Blanqui’s intervention: the proletariat serves to clarify once again the fundamentally conflictual nature of politics.<sup>485</sup> Yet Blanqui’s insistence on the divisive character of the term ‘proletariat’ was not unique. Those who sought reform through co-operation and mutual partnership explicitly rejected the term precisely on the grounds of the discord and division it created. ‘Que le nom de prolétaire, nom insultant et devenu odieux, disparaisse, et que ceux qui le portaient trouvent en nous aide et secours’.<sup>486</sup> So pleaded the pages of *L’écho de la fabrique* in January 1832, for example. Blanqui subscribes to the same logic from the inverse position, for if politics demands the recognition and full assumption of conflict, it follows that the name ‘proletariat’ must also be fully assumed. As Kristin Ross observes, and adopting Rancierian terms herself, Blanqui’s insistence in the letter to Maillard on speaking of proletariat is precisely to create a gap, a division and a rupture where the term ‘democrat’, having been appropriated by Napoléon III’s Imperial regime, now created consensus in the service of continued inequality and domination. Proletariat, unlike democrat, still named ‘the division to be overcome between those judged capable of governing and those judged incapable’.<sup>487</sup> Proletariat, unlike democrat, had not been deprived of its political function: to reflect and expose the often concealed but no less

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<sup>484</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 224.

<sup>485</sup> As Rancière notes: ‘le tort qu’il expose ne saurait-il se régler sous forme d’accord entre des parties. Il ne se règle pas parce que les sujets que le tort politique met en jeu ne sont pas des entités auxquelles il arriverait par accident tel ou tel tort mais des sujets dont l’existence même est le mode de manifestation de ce tort’ (*La Mésestente*, p. 64).

<sup>486</sup> ‘La fabrique est-elle perdue ?’, *L’écho de la fabrique*, Sunday 22 January 1832.

<sup>487</sup> Kristin Ross, ‘Democracy for Sale’, in *Democracy in what state?*, pp. 90-91. Cf. Rancière, *La Mésestente*, p. 63.

real ‘guerre civile’ and the two opposing groups waging this conflict.<sup>488</sup> Only through subjectifying structural inequalities can the task of ending them begin, Blanqui assumes.

To take this analysis further, it is in this respect that Blanqui can be seen to hold a dual concept of popular unity. On the one hand there is the popular unity that is constructed around and serving as justification for an unjust and unequal social order.<sup>489</sup> On the other hand there is a conception of popular unity that assumes the equality of all and affirms and practices solidarity as the political translation of this principle. If the first illusory unity creates and upholds the barrier to equality by means of consensual domination, the second genuine, emancipatory unity can shatter that consensus and overcome that barrier. In all cases there must be no doubt around whom and what political unity is sought. ‘Le mot : « *Union* » est devenu l’arme de guerre de tous les ennemis de la Liberté’, Blanqui warns in *La Patrie en Danger*. ‘Qu’on le sache bien, concorde, pour les républicains, ne signifie pas asservissement aux contre-révolutionnaires. Ils veulent l’union pour le salut et non pour la ruine de la République.’<sup>490</sup> Without clarity of positions the ‘mélange d’éléments aussi disparates ne pourrait qu’être dangereux pour le cause’, Blanqui later told Clemenceau in 1879.

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<sup>488</sup> ‘On les repousse comme provocateurs de la guerre civile. Cette raison ne suffit-elle pas pour vous ouvrir les yeux ? Qu’est-ce donc que nous sommes contraints de faire depuis longtemps, sinon la guerre civile ? Et contre qui ? Ah ! Voilà précisément la question qu’on s’efforce d’embrouiller par l’obscurité des mots ; car il s’agit d’empêcher que les deux drapeaux ennemis ne se posent carrément en face l’un de l’autre afin d’escroquer, après le combat, au drapeau victorieux les bénéfices de la victoire et de permettre aux vaincus de se retrouver tout doucement les vainqueurs. On ne veut pas que les deux camps adverses s’appellent de leurs vrais noms : *prolétariat*, *bourgeoisie*. Cependant, ils n’en ont pas d’autre’ (Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard’, *MA*, pp. 176-177).

<sup>489</sup> This is also evident in the distinction Adolphe Thiers establishes, when speaking in May 1850, between ‘le peuple’ as conceived and recognised in the eyes of the law and ‘la multitude’ as those unrecognised by the law and intentionally kept outside of the official order. Thiers’s contempt for the outsiders who must remain outside, the plebs who do not form part of the populus, is indeed arrestingly clear: ‘C’est la multitude, ce n’est pas le peuple que nous voulons exclure, c’est cette multitude confuse, cette multitude des vagabonds dont on ne peut saisir ni le domicile, ni la famille, si remuante qu’on ne peut la saisir nulle part, qui n’ont pas su créer pour leur famille un asile appréciable : c’est cette multitude que la loi a pour but d’éloigner’ (cited in Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses*, p. 459).

<sup>490</sup> Blanqui, ‘La réaction’, *La Patrie en Danger*, Monday 19 September 1870.



Without clear choices, without clear sides and without a clear understanding of interests and principles, the false consensual unity of the adversary will absorb and weaken the cause of true emancipatory unity, as occurred in 1848. ‘C’est ce mot perfide : union, qui a été notre ruine.’<sup>491</sup>

The fundamentally divisive logic of Blanqui’s politics again takes centre stage; again, between exploiters and exploited there is no third option; and again most readers have overlooked this formal imperative of Blanqui’s politics. When commenting that ‘[w]hether or not Blanqui’s conceptions of class struggle anticipated modern socialist theories, they did define the nature of socialist action for him’<sup>492</sup> Spitzer appears to hit on the crucial point yet he fails to then grasp its full implications: creating a divide in order to expose a conflict is itself of far greater practical political importance to Blanqui than establishing precisely who or what compromises each side. Naming the subject of social inequality establishes the political divide between *us*, *we* (the people and those united in working for its emancipation, which is the emancipation of all) and *them*, *you* (the rich and those sustaining its supremacy over all). It is for this reason that Blanqui can, paradoxically it may otherwise seem, describe his usage of the terms ‘proletariat’ and ‘bourgeois’ as having ‘un sens clair et net ; ils disent catégoriquement les choses.’<sup>493</sup> Proletariat, in this sense, is a subjective position; it both presupposes and expresses a political choice, a political principle. ‘Democrat’, meanwhile, having been appropriated by all political camps, is ‘un mot vague, banal, sans acception précise, un mot en caoutchouc.’ The word has been deprived of its strictly political functions – decision, allegiance, division – and therefore must be abandoned. Blanqui thus compels his

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<sup>491</sup> Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Clemenceau’, *MA*, p. 394. On this point, see also in particular Blanqui, ‘L’union des vraies démocrates’, November 1848, *MA*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>492</sup> Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 102.

<sup>493</sup> Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard’, *MA*, p. 176. See also Blanqui MSS 9582, fo. 78 [n.d.].

interlocutor, Maillard: ‘Soyez de votre camp et mettez votre cocarde. Vous êtes prolétaire, parce que vous voulez l’égalité réelle entre les citoyens’.<sup>494</sup> To be a proletarian is to side with us over them, with the people over capital, with emancipation over domination, with equality over inequality. So make your choice: Proletarian or bourgeois? Us or them? Philippe Vigier’s claim noted earlier that Blanqui’s background is inconsistent with that of a proletarian completely overlooks this point. Blanqui is indeed well aware that ‘par ma famille, par mon éducation, je suis un bourgeois’. But that is not to say that a bourgeois by birth cannot join the proletarian camp out of conviction, uniting with and supporting their struggle.<sup>495</sup> Blanqui’s proletariat is only an extension of the logic of making choices and taking sides outlined in Chapter 2. For Blanqui all politics comes down to a matter of voluntary choice. Although, as I also suggested in the previous chapter, Blanqui is arguably too willing to abandon words and concepts whose meanings are worth struggling over, we can now understand the concerns informing this approach: the term proletariat is an operator of political choice and commitment; it says whom you are for and whom you are against.

So far we can see that Rancière brings into focus several important elements of Blanqui’s politics. First and foremost, Rancière reaffirms the view that Blanqui’s proletariat should not be read as a sociological category but in political terms as an excluded group, as ‘les incompétés’, to employ his term. Moreover, and perhaps most usefully, it is clear that proletariat is for Blanqui a subjective political position – it carries a political choice, a political side, a political conviction. In this respect, the proletariat and the people are extensions of some of Blanqui’s most basic political assumptions regarding conscious choices and militant engagement, as outlined in the

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

preceding chapter. The term proletariat cuts through the veil of consensual domination to present politics in its purest form: a conflict of two irreconcilable groups, interests and principles. It brings into focus questions of unity and division and their role in any attempt to create and sustain the popular unity of the dominated as the essential prerequisite to recognising and overthrowing the order of domination.

Beyond such insights some problems nonetheless present themselves. Rancière, much like Laclau, overemphasises the extent to which naming an unnamed group, the performative affirmation driving this ‘processus de subjectivation’, alone creates a subject or actor. Principal concern for the politics of perception fails to take sufficient account of the *action* constitutive of the actor and of the material realities of both the absence and the exercise of political power. The purely nominal inscription of the proletariat’s exclusion cannot redress the actual material conditions of that exclusion. It is this point that I shall now address.

### **Blanqui beyond Rancière**

Central to Rancière’s reading is the explicit denial that for Blanqui the proletariat has any bearing on labour, work or the conditions of work. ‘Les prolétaires ne sont ni les travailleurs manuels, ni les classes laborieuses.’ What is subjectified with Blanqui’s proletariat, Rancière believes, ‘ce n’est ni le travail ni la misère, mais le pur compte des in comptés’.<sup>496</sup> For Rancière the wrong of the ‘miscount’, that which is subjectified with the name ‘proletariat’, is largely expressed in terms of the politics of perception, of the distribution of who is and who is not audible or visible and the social order in which this distribution is assigned, structured and legitimised. Simply

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<sup>496</sup> Rancière, *La Mésestente*, pp. 62-63.

put, for Rancière, after Ballanche and Jacotot, to be amongst the ‘uncounted’ is to be unacknowledged as an equal speaking being and considered incapable of rational argument, capable only of the animalistic expression of pleasure and pain. Injustice emanates from the perceived inequality of speaking beings and its manifestation in a social body in which one of its parts – the *sans-part* – is unseen and unheard, its equal participation in political life as equal speaking beings denied. Politics thus conceived concerns speech and the account of speech. Politics aesthetically verifies the presupposed intellectual equality of speaking beings.<sup>497</sup>

Such assertions require further consideration with greater reference to Blanqui’s thought, for they represent at once a great strength and an ultimate limitation of Rancière’s account.

### *(In)equality of intelligence*

We have seen that equality, in Blanqui’s eyes, is rooted in a notion of intellectual equality. ‘La pensée,’ Blanqui explains, ‘courant électrique entre les membres de la grande famille humaine, transmissible en raison de la facilité des communication et de l’accroissement des lumières. L’isolement et l’ignorance interceptent le courant.’<sup>498</sup>

Yet an important contrast between Blanqui and Rancière concerns the question of capacity. Where Rancière sees injustice is the present non-recognition of the existing equal intellectual capacities of all, for Blanqui to assert the basic equality of intellectual capacity is not to presume or presuppose the actual yet unacknowledged existence or exercise of that capacity within present society, or indeed that the capacity can exist or be exercised at all within the status quo. Intellectual equality is not unheard or unseen and requiring its confirmation in the face of its denial so much

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<sup>497</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 45-58, 71. See also Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

<sup>498</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 137 [n.d.].

as actually manipulated and repressed; the capacity is unrealised and unexercised at present and will only achieve its full realisation and exercise through a didactic process of intellectual development and progress. To put it another way, Rancière has already arrived at the popular enlightenment to which Blanqui aspires. The political implications of these contrasting anthropological assumptions are profound. Blanqui's understanding of the intellectual inequality of the proletariat radically alters the meaning and role of politics to that of Rancière. Politics is not simply the verification of an at-present-unrecognised intellectual equality; politics is the material work of overcoming the powers upholding the intellectual inequality of the present as the prerequisite to finally allowing for the creation and exercise of intellectual equality. Hence Blanqui's diagnosis of unprivileged masses forced to languish in uneducated ignorance; hence the need for an enlightened leadership to speak on their behalf until they are capable of speaking for themselves; hence the need for a revolution to inaugurate the process by which this intellectual capacity can be fully exercised and the forces maintaining its current impediment suppressed; and hence Blanqui's conception of the processes of popular transformation, an issue we shall address in the next chapter. On all these points Blanqui and Rancière are totally at odds. Arguably Blanqui recognises to a greater extent than Rancière what is fundamentally at stake in the empowering of a political actor and the overcoming of the real obstacles that the construction of a more materially equal social arrangement will demand, yet neither's approach and solutions are entirely satisfactory. If Rancière seems to overlook the role of organised political action in bridging the (also overlooked) gap between the status quo and the advent of more just and egalitarian social arrangement, Blanqui too often overstates the division between knowledge and ignorance, between those who are presently capable of understanding and thus of decisively acting and those who

are not.

### *Perception*

To expand on the discussion of the importance of the written word in Chapter 1, let us consider Blanqui's concern for perception, beginning with the 1832 defense speech. Under the Orléanist regime any attempt to hear the plight of the oppressed, who work day and night only to remain starving, Blanqui told the Parisian court in January 1832, falls on deaf ears. 'Les organes ministériels répètent avec complaisance qu'il y a des voies ouvertes aux doléances des prolétaires, que les lois leur présentent des moyens réguliers d'obtenir place pour leurs intérêts', he notes, offering a characteristically blunt response: 'C'est une dérision.'<sup>499</sup> The proletariat remains invisible, inaudible, mute; they are, to paraphrase Rancière, only recognised and only exist through their very non-recognition and non-existence:

Le peuple n'écrit pas dans les journaux ; il n'envoie pas de pétition aux Chambres : ce serait temps perdu. Bien plus, toutes les voix qui ont un retentissement dans la sphère politique, les voix des salons, celles des boutiques, des cafés, en un mot de tous les lieux où se forme ce qu'on appelle l'opinion publique, ces voix sont celles des privilèges ; pas une n'appartient au peuple ; il est muet ; il végète éloigné de ces hautes régions où se règlent ses destinées.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, p. 68.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Press freedom is therefore in many ways ‘[la] liberté la plus précieuse de toutes’<sup>501</sup> because what is perceived helps to define the political, shaping the parameters of political action. The battle over who or what is seen and heard, written and read, in many ways cuts to the heart of the Blanqui’s politics. The Orléanist government’s attempts to end press freedom, which is the freedom to think and write,<sup>502</sup> must be resisted at all costs.<sup>503</sup> Almost forty years later, when Napoleon III was in power, Blanqui still decried, in strikingly similar terms to the 1832 defence speech, ‘[l]a prétendue égalité devant la loi, donnant au riche le monopole de la presse et la parole, imposant le silence et la soumission au pauvre’.<sup>504</sup> There is no doubt here that Blanqui’s proletariat clearly has an aesthetic dimension; it subjectifies, as Rancière affirms, ‘la différence entre la distribution inégalitaire des corps sociaux et l’égalité des êtres parlants’.<sup>505</sup> Moreover, Blanqui speaks repeatedly of how during the Restoration the people had fallen silent and remained a passive, ‘spectateur silencieux’ to the conflict between the middle and upper classes in which they had no stake. It therefore follows that political (non-)subjectivity is often defined in terms of perception and the insistence that to be a spectator (that is, an inactive or passive onlooker) is to be silent, with the implication to be inactive is to be mute, to be active is to have a voice that is heard.<sup>506</sup> In unifying the lone voice of the individual with that of the collective voice of the people a truly political intervention is created: ‘Nos cris isolés se perdraient dans le tumulte immense de la société ; mais unis en faisceaux

<sup>501</sup> Blanqui, ‘Loi qui interdit au peuple la faculté de lire’, *MA*, p. 104.

<sup>502</sup> Blanqui, ‘Première Saisie’, March 1834, *OI*, p. 279.

<sup>503</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Attentat contre le peuple’, March 1834, *OI*, pp. 281-282.

<sup>504</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 151 [27 February 1869].

<sup>505</sup> Rancière, *La Mésestence*, p. 63.

<sup>506</sup> Blanqui repeatedly uses this analogy: during the Restoration, he states in the ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du Peuple’, *MA*, the people ‘se tut’ (p. 81); ‘Il restait spectateur silencieux’ (p. 82); ‘il épiait en silence’ (p. 83); ‘le peuple silencieux et cru démissionnaire depuis quinze ans’ (p. 84). See also in *Le Libérateur* where Blanqui speaks of ‘le silence de la rue’ (‘Pourquoi il n’y a plus d’émeutes’, 2 February 1834, *OI*, pp. 266, 271).

d'acclamations, ils formeront une grande voix qui fera taire ces charmeurs de la tyrannie.'<sup>507</sup>

So important is perception and the sensory that the issue remained a key concern of Blanqui's writings, particularly in the early 1830s. But it also raises some important questions about Blanqui's project more generally. The opening line of the 'But du journal' of *Le Libérateur* declares that: 'De toutes les exclusions qui pèsent sur le citoyen sans fortune, la plus douloureuse et la plus amèrement sentie, est celle qui lui interdit de publier sa pensée.'<sup>508</sup> In a society in which the press is nothing more than the mouthpiece for the 'classes opulentes' and persecution means those men devoted to equality find 'un gantelet de fer leur brise la parole sur les lèvres', Blanqui writes that he 'entreprend de braver l'interdiction lancée par l'aristocratie des écus contre le pauvre qui ose penser.' *Le Libérateur*, the self-styled 'Journal des opprimés', was therefore conceived to 'exposer en termes simples, clairs et précis, pourquoi le peuple est malheureux, et comment il doit cesser de l'être.'<sup>509</sup> It offers a voice for those who have no voice in the political sphere. The tension here is obvious enough. To respond to the inaudibility of the poor by speaking on their behalf, speaking for and to them, rather than providing a platform or opening a space from which they can truly speak for themselves (a position Rancière would advocate) is no doubt indicative of the often excessively top-down nature of Blanqui's politics. It could be said to reveal the lack of *self*-emancipatory practice within Blanqui's project, informed as this by a belief in necessity of instruction, of the hierarchical transmission of knowledge from the enlightened to the unenlightened, from those who know to those who do not. Indeed, we must recall, as was outlined in Chapter 1, that for Blanqui the importance of newspapers and propaganda is also, and perhaps most

<sup>507</sup> Blanqui, 'Déclaration du Comité provisoire des Ecoles', 22 January 1831, *MA*, p. 60.

<sup>508</sup> Blanqui, 'Présentation et but du journal', 2 February 1834, *OI*, p. 258.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.



fundamentally, rooted in his conception of the decisive role of intelligence and the insistence on popular enlightenment as the precondition for social emancipation.

*The untold suffering of work*

Rancière's insistence on the aesthetic dimension of political subjectivity, though undeniably important and informative as far as Blanqui is concerned, nonetheless leads him to ignore or implicitly dismiss other factors at play in Blanqui's conception of the proletariat and the people, particularly the human suffering caused by political marginalisation and the conditions of work, broadly defined. (We might in fact point out that the citations upon which Rancière's reading is based are muddled, his conclusions perhaps misleading as a result.)<sup>510</sup> Of course, a possible problem that presents itself here is locating the point at which Rancière's reading of Blanqui ends and the exposition of his own political thought begins, if indeed such a demarcation can be established at all. On the other hand, one might respond that even as a broader discussion the exercise remains instructive and valid. With such caveats in mind, the assertion that Blanqui's proletariat is impervious to material conditions nonetheless remains misleading.

The defense speech, which Rancière likewise takes as his point of departure, depicts the proletariat or people as not only those with no political voice and no recognised part in the social order, but also those who suffer and whose suffering goes

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<sup>510</sup> Rancière quotes Blanqui as stating that his self-styled 'profession' of proletariat '[c]'est la profession de trente million de Français qui vivent de leur travail...'. But this is a combination of two different exchanges between Blanqui and the judge. In the first exchange, on 10 December 1831, when the judge asks for Blanqui's 'profession' and is met with the response of 'prolétaire', the judge states that it is not a profession, to which Blanqui declares: 'Si ce n'est pas une profession, je suis sans profession.' It is only on 10 January, and responding on this occasion to the key word of his 'état' and not 'profession', that Blanqui offers the famous reply cited at the beginning of this chapter: 'C'est l'état de 30 millions de Français ...'. ('Procès des Quinze', 10 December 1831 and 10 January 1832, *OI*, p. 184, 186). Given that in Rancière's analysis, as he himself states, '[t]out y tient à la double acception d'un même mot, celui de *profession*' (*La Mésestente*, p. 62) this cannot but call into question some of his assertions.

unseen and unheard, the suffering excluded. Elucidating this point, much of the intervention first strives to pull away the veil of democratic inclusion and representation. Blanqui derides the Orléanists' self-professed representative government, in which 'cent mille bourgeois en forment ce qu'on appelle, par une ironie amère, l'élément démocratique.'<sup>511</sup> Propping up this system - and returning to a theme evoked at the beginning of the speech when Blanqui declares the court and judicial system illegitimate and rejects its authority<sup>512</sup> - the law is nothing more than an ideological tool of exclusion. 'Les lois sont faites par cent mille électeurs, appliquées par cent mille jurés, exécutées par cent mille gardes nationaux urbains', he states, asking the court in turn, and here we come to the crucial point, 'que font les trente millions de prolétaires dans toutes ces évolutions ? Ils paient.'<sup>513</sup> In reasserting the gap between the official order and the plight of the oppressed multitude, Blanqui's proletariat is not only paying in the literal sense of the unequal distribution of the fiscal burden, but is also paying materially and physically for its ever-increasing impoverishment.

How, if at all, does Blanqui believe the rich respond to the suffering for which they are responsible? While most remain blind or indifferent, the more astute among them sense that potential problems are afoot, and so offer tokenistic gestures to alleviate poverty - not out of humanitarian concern but as the minimal pragmatic measures necessary to prevent undermining their order and to save them from the potential 'péril' posed by a starving and hopeless multitude. In a metaphor that encapsulates the thrust of this argument, Blanqui reaffirms that social injustice exists between the domains of both material and political inequality, and any minor concessions will never end such injustice: 'Quant aux droits politiques, il n'en faut

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<sup>511</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, p. 65.

<sup>512</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69

pas parler, il ne s'agit que de jeter aux prolétaires un os à ronger.<sup>514</sup> The proletariat is starved of food and rights. Any form of recognition is solely the instrument of continued unrecognition: the privileged classes 'ne reconnaîtraient au peuple que des appétits de brute, afin de s'arroger le droit de se dispenser ce qu'il faut d'aliments pour entretenir sa végétation animale qu'elles exploitent !'<sup>515</sup> Even when 'la tribune' or the press offer some vacuous words of pity towards this misery, silence is imposed in the name of public safety, raising such matters is reproached as anarchy, and any remaining voices of dissent are ultimately imprisoned. No one is allowed to pose the real, profound questions which might disturb the social order. When the silence of subservience is finally returned, the supporters of the government claim France to be happy, peaceful and for order to reign.<sup>516</sup> And so the proletariat continues to be unheard, their suffering continues in silence and without end, and the conflict at the heart of French society remains concealed beneath the apparently 'tranquil waters'<sup>517</sup> of order. In a system that concedes nothing to the great majority of the people, that is arrogantly indifferent to injustice and the 'si cruel outrage' of present society, simply no opportunities or channels exist to break the very monopoly of power that only serves the imperatives of exploitation.<sup>518</sup> In the eyes of the privileged few, the under-privileged many are condemned, destined to have 'leurs souffrances ... leur état d'abjection sur la terre' compensated only in another life.<sup>519</sup> Unlike his accusers, however, Blanqui claims to hear the screams and cries of the starving. The exclusion of this group under the law, through the tax system, in the public sphere, indeed

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<sup>514</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>517</sup> Here I am thinking of Johan Galtung, who observes that 'personal violence may more easily be noticed, even though the 'tranquil waters' of structural violence may contain much more violence' (Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', pp. 173-174).

<sup>518</sup> See Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, pp. 67, 70.

<sup>519</sup> Blanqui, 'L'aristocratie et le peuple', *OI*, p. 167; 'De la législation', *OI*, p. 170.

within all facets of the politico-social structure is a manifestation of injustice and inequality. Because of their exclusion from the public sphere, the proletariat's plight, exposed by Blanqui as a product of the socio-political system, is not even recognised in the mainstream political discourse. It is untold – in both senses of the word – suffering. As Blanqui again asked in the late 1850s, and again referring to plebeians: 'Qui voudrait prêter l'oreille aux cris et aux pleurs de ces vils troupeaux tombant par milliers dans les abattoirs de l'histoire ?'<sup>520</sup>

What of the relationship between the actor, work and the conditions of work? Worker, in Blanqui's lexicon, to be sure is an extremely broad concept requiring explanation. Evoked largely in the Saint-Simonian sense, it denotes the producers, the vast majority of the population ('thirty' or 'thirty-two million' French men and women) who together form the working masses as distinct from the small group of rich, parasitic idlers whose wealth and power derives solely from the work of the (poor and powerless) majority.<sup>521</sup> In turn, work is often valorized as an ideal and principle: together with enlightened thought the two compromise the exclusive 'sources de la richesse sociale'; 'l'âme et la vie de l'humanité', together they form the banner of equality, contrasted with 'oisiveté et exploitation' of privilege. Again presenting a set of rigid dichotomies, with thought and work, society breathes, grows and progresses; without them society is doomed to collapse, disintegration and death.<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>520</sup> Blanqui MSS 9581, fo. 39 [15 January 1859].

<sup>521</sup> Read in purely economic terms Blanqui's many critics are right to point out how this fails to capture the social dynamics it describes, for as Max Weber of course showed capitalist accumulation is by no means linked to idleness – on the contrary. Blanqui for his part appears to later take account of this, using the term 'oisif' less and less in his later writings and even describing himself a form of Protestant ethic linked to economic activity (see for example Blanqui MSS 9587, fo. 204 [n.d.]). The term 'oisif' did not disappear altogether, however, as seen, for example, in Blanqui, 'L'Armée esclavée et opprimée', 31 October 1880, *MA*, p. 418.

<sup>522</sup> Blanqui 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, pp. 115-116; 'Qui fait la soupe doit la manger', *OI*, p. 291.

However (intentionally) broad and imprecise the notion, contrary to Rancière's insistence, for Blanqui the proletariat unquestionably *does* imply, in the most general of senses, both work and, more importantly, the destitution and suffering caused by that work under the established order. Blanqui locates in the social relation between worker and employer (or worker and capitalist, wages and revenues) the source of human suffering.<sup>523</sup> Just as the point of departure for Blanqui's analysis of property is explicitly a question of its human impact, his analysis of production only mirrors this logic, sharing and extending its humanist concerns. A political actor – whatever its collective noun – is formed when individuals consciously and collectively directly unite in the name of their collective humanity, of their right to live a life free of the pain, suffering and misery inflicted upon them solely as a consequence of their lack of wealth and power.<sup>524</sup> We might finally add that Blanqui willingly uses the word 'victim',<sup>525</sup> a term Rancière rejects, to highlight the brutality of everyday life for the poor and, in so doing, revealing the unity between these victims of social forces and the victims of state repression in times of revolt, as we saw in the previous chapter. 'Travailler, souffrir et mourir pour les/des nouveaux maitres, c'est le devoir qu'elle impose à la Plèbe par la mitraille, le bagne et la guillotine.'<sup>526</sup> The proletariat names at once the expression of destitute suffering and the committed, active movement to alleviate it.

All this is not to say, however, that Blanqui's workers or proletariat should now be seen as sociological category. Blanqui's conception of work and the worker still cuts across an entire range of sociological groups – artisans, peasants, labourers.

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<sup>523</sup> See, for example, Blanqui, 'Présentation et but du journal', *OI*, p. 259; 'Qui fait la soupe doit la manger', *OI*, p. 293.

<sup>524</sup> Blanqui, 'Pourquoi il n'y a plus d'émeutes', *OI*, p. 270.

<sup>525</sup> See, for example, Blanqui 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, p. 119; 'Qui fait la soupe doit la manger', *OI*, p. 293.

<sup>526</sup> Blanqui MSS 9582, fo. 76 [n.d.].

Any concessions to work do not necessarily mean that his actor is a strictly socio-economic category conceived in terms of its relation to the means of production. Blanqui's actor does not emerge from the historical evolution of the modes of production and the capitalist wage relation. Blanqui's actor is, first and foremost, a *political* actor created through its conscious voluntary action, not through its historical development as a specific socio-economic group which in turn accords it a privileged political role and agency. Though Blanqui does on occasion come close to aspects of Marxian thought, as we have seen, those who suggest Blanqui pre-empt the sociological class categories and economic analyses of the late Marx's critique of political economy or the Marxian conception of class struggle more generally are clutching at straws, attempting to establish prophetic insight or linear development where the actual substance of such claims is far from clear, its textual illustration far from abundant, its conclusions far from convincing. (I return to the comparison with historical materialism in Chapter 5.) At all times Blanqui's fundamental distinction remains between the rich, the small group at the top of society holding all wealth and power who produce and contribute nothing but gain everything, and the workers, the majority without wealth or power who produce and contribute everything but gain nothing. This division, in turn, can be reduced to two sets of moral and political principles and ideals, privilege versus equality. The primacy of political form over strict socio-economic content therefore still stands.

The point, instead, is to acknowledge the role of impoverishment and material inequality in the construction of this political schema, to understand that Blanqui's proletariat is at once an impoverished worker *and* a potential political actor.<sup>527</sup> Work,

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<sup>527</sup> Cf. Buret, who similarly wrote: 'Les ouvriers sont aussi libres de devoirs envers leurs maîtres que ceux-ci le sont envers eux ; ils les considèrent comme des hommes d'une classe différente, opposée et même ennemie. Isolés de la nation, mis en dehors de la communauté sociale et politique, seuls avec leurs besoins et leurs misères, ils s'agitent pour sortir de cette effrayante solitude, et, comme les

in this sense, is primarily a political concept operating as a divide between exploiters and exploited, oppressors and oppressed, in which the subjective commitment to moral and political principles – dignity, justice, equality, freedom – are privileged over a historical materialist critique of the internal mechanisms of capitalist production generating the objective conditions for subjective engagement. Speaking of common destitution and its common alleviation through collective emancipation to bring about the freedom and equality of all, Blanqui could be placed in the tradition of humanist socialism for which the conditions of the poor as those excluded from power and the fruits of prosperity is so crucial. Is this humanist commitment to the common people and to equality and emancipation as moral principles not in fact reminiscent of the young Marx's well-known first description of the proletariat? Articulated in 'philosophical' or 'ideal' terms that predate his later 'actual', 'concrete' conception of the proletariat by way of the 'critique of political economy',<sup>528</sup> Marx depicts 'a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering and which lays claim to no *particular right* because the wrong it suffers is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*'?<sup>529</sup> Certainly, Blanqui suggests a universal character of proletarian suffering and conversely the proletariat's common humanity in the face of its dehumanization. We can also add that equality as a general principle denotes the end of social distinctions, of all forms of domination, bringing about freedom and equality through democracy – the rule of the common people. In terms of the actor, Blanqui's vision of post-revolutionary society in this respect inverts the basic distinction at stake in his conception of revolutionary politics according to

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barbares auxquels on les a compares, ils méditent peut-être une invasion' (cited in Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses*, p. 453).

<sup>528</sup> Daniel Bensaïd, *Marx for Our Times*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 193-194.

<sup>529</sup> Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction', *Early Writings*, p. 256. Rancière also alludes to this passage, see *La Mésestence*, p. 39; *Aux bords du politique*, pp. 118-119.

which, as we have seen, the people either remain nothing or become everything. Having politically become everything, the realisation thereafter of a society devoid of ‘différences (diversité, multiplicité) de classes’<sup>530</sup> demands the people once again become nothing, in a sense; the people must disintegrate or dissolve, to adopt Marx’s term, along with the transitional power that facilitates this dissolution.

Where does this leave Blanqui and Rancière? We have seen that for Rancière to be amongst the ‘uncounted’ of an existing social order is to be unacknowledged as an equal speaking being; this excluded part of the community is perceived only through its animalistic voicing of pleasure and suffering. But does inequality not amount to more than speech and the injustice of its miscount? Is it not also a matter of what that miscount materially produces so long as it is sustained, of how being unseen, unheard and uncounted denies the expression of what it concretely means to be amongst the unseen, unheard and uncounted, of the realities of the everyday existence of those deemed non-existent? Therein lies the importance of suffering, as well as pain and deprivation, *alongside* intelligence and speech in any account of inequality. The proletariat may at present only be recognised as the figure of passive suffering, it may at best only receive vacuous compassionate gestures from those who ultimately posit the structural continuation of the proletariat’s role and position - and Blanqui shares Rancière’s concerns in this respect. But that is not to say that politics should not seek to fully and forcefully expose the status quo’s structural imperative of dehumanization, suffering and other forms of inequality from the principle that they have no place in a truly free and humane society. ‘Le jour où par la communication universelle de la pensée, toute l’espèce humaine ressentira électriquement les griefs du plus humbles de ses membres,’ writes Blanqui, ‘ce jour-là sera proclamée la

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<sup>530</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 107 [14 October 1867]. See also Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 110; ‘Tout l’espoir des prolétaires est dans la République’, *OI*, p. 255.



souveraineté absolue de la faiblesse et l'enfant qui naît sera roi, parce qu'il est l'être faible par excellence.<sup>531</sup> Rancière does not seem to have much concern for the material inequalities that produce and indeed reproduce aesthetic inequality. Rejecting the notion of exclusion as unthinking suffering, Rancière's conception of politics affirms intelligence without any obvious means of transcending suffering. And though Blanqui certainly expresses similar concerns regarding the (in)equality of speaking beings, he is nonetheless also acutely aware of the harmful consequences of non-recognition beyond a solely perceptive sense, bringing into focus the suffering, misery and impoverishment of the excluded and the unheard. It is not just a matter of asserting the basic fact of the injustice of an unequalitarian social order, but of going beyond its (no less significant) non-recognition *tout court* to actually interrogate the material conditions of this injustice. Therein resides the *socio-economic content* of Blanqui's proletariat to complement (yet not surpass) its primarily *political form*. The social and the aesthetic are united in and through a principled political struggle. 'Prolétaires qui souffrez et qui faites entendre d'inutiles plaintes, c'est la république seule, c'est l'égalité qui peut mettre un terme à nos souffrances'.<sup>532</sup> Proletariat, for Blanqui, subjectifies the 'uncounted' as the toiling masses and the impoverished workers, those who can live only from their labour and are excluded from wealth and power as opposed to the privileged, those who can prosper purely from their birthright and guarantee of wealth, education and power. Proletariat names at once workers *and* excluded outcasts, an occupation *and* the subjectivation of a wrong. Blanqui affirms the common humanity of the proletariat *in spite of* its systemic dehumanization and suffering.

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<sup>531</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 287 [n.d.].

<sup>532</sup> Blanqui, 'Tout l'espoir des prolétaires est dans la République', *OI*, p. 255.

We might therefore say that in Blanqui's understanding of 'la guerre entre les riches et les pauvres' the oppression of the proletariat functions in two closely-linked dimensions. First, there is the material reality of injustice itself: the proletariat goes hungry and is dying of starvation while the rich lead a life of opulent excess, and indeed the structure of society is such that the latter is dependent on the former, thus exploitation serves inequality. Second, there is the oppression at work that enables this suffering to go unheard and unrecognised. Dispossessed from the land, the 'instruments de travail' and the fruits of their labour, and disenfranchised from the political sphere, the proletariat is discarded to the periphery and a state of exclusion where they face misery and starvation. Each form of oppression therefore reinforces the other in a self-perpetuating cycle. Injustice is the condition of exclusion, exclusion the condition of injustice - both are symptomatic of inequality, both the condition of the proletariat.

A form of political reasoning is, then, the framework through which we should read Blanqui's conception of the people and the proletariat. Blanqui's people or proletariat, understood as in the work of Laclau and Rancière as a consciously broad political construction, designates the anonymous masses, the invisible and forgotten multitude, the excluded 'barbarians' and 'brutes' whose struggle to assert its equality in an order in which it counts for nothing will necessarily bring it into conflict with that very order. Blanqui invites us to reconsider how we define the marginalised, the impoverished and the oppressed, those who continue to be excluded from political, social and economic wealth and power. Moreover, having acknowledged the central importance of choice and commitment for Blanqui's politics in Chapter 2, we now see how his use of the people and the proletariat as an extension of this principled

political engagement. Blanqui attests to a timeless political conviction: no matter what the guise, no matter where it occurs, as long as injustice and inequality prevail, so too will the politics of confronting it, of naming it, and of ending it. Further than Laclau and Rancière, however, Blanqui insists on the material empowerment of the people, on the seizing and sustained exercise of its collective power, as the prerequisite to its emancipation. It is to the question of how to collectively act in line with these insights that I shall now turn in addressing Blanqui's voluntarism, at which point we will be able to begin to piece together some of the basic elements of Blanqui's politics outlined so far, arriving at a better understanding of his project as a whole.

## Chapter 4 – Voluntarism and Will

‘La gloire est dans le péril affronté volontairement pour le triomphe des convictions ; elle n’est pas dans un/le danger subi par contrainte et par peur.’<sup>533</sup>

We can now begin to piece together some of the constituent elements of Blanqui’s project. The previous three chapters revealed a politics organised around a theory of the conscious and committed actor. For Blanqui, we have seen, communism results from an enlightened and active collective political movement. Enlightened thought precedes decisive action. Unenlightened, unguided and uninformed political action is doomed to manipulation, appropriation and disintegration – to failure, in short. So, moving beyond the enlightened prerequisite, what are the characteristics of political action? We have considered who will carry out this mobilization, but we have only begun to consider how and why those actors will do so. This brings us to the question of voluntarism and will, of Blanqui’s conscious *volition*.

This chapter will begin by assessing the main features of Blanqui’s voluntarism, namely that politics is a battle of wills and so the first decisive step is the voluntary decision to fully assume this struggle; that any emancipatory political will must be grounded in the capacity for its own practical exercise; that the actual form and consequences of a process of collective volition are neither predetermined nor prescribed but only created through its own exercise; that political will demands a sense of moral duty and purpose, a principled conviction, unyielding resolve and unwavering faith, not least to overcome all the obstacles that will inevitably appear on the path to its realisation; and finally that all forms of voluntary servitude or collusion

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<sup>533</sup> Blanqui MSS 9586, fo 402 [n.d.].

with the forces of oppression prevent the realisation of a process of collective volition, and so must be renounced. In each of these respects Blanqui offers valuable insights into the theory and practice of voluntarist politics. Like many other organising principles of Blanqui's thought, voluntarism has not received systematic treatment. The task of reconstructing Blanqui's conception of political will is therefore the aim of the first half of the chapter. I will then engage with what are, in my view, some of the major problems or limitations that Blanqui's conception of volition confronts, particularly when considered in light of the notion of post-revolutionary transition.

### **How to begin**

What is meant by political will? Following Hallward,<sup>534</sup> my definition of this contentious and neglected notion turns to the tradition from which Blanqui's own conception of will derives that begins with Rousseau and finds later articulation and amendment in the writings and practice of Robespierre and Saint Just, Marx and Lenin, Gramsci and Che Guevara, amongst many others. I shall limit myself here to Rousseau, however, as both the theoretical point of departure for the tradition as a whole and for Blanqui in particular.

'Since, in order to will, it is necessary to be free', Rousseau writes, political will begins when '[e]ach of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will'. A group of individuals' conscious act of voluntary association produces a 'moral and collective body', the people, of which all willing individuals are part and through which a unified, common, general will is

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<sup>534</sup> Here as before I follow Hallward's conception of political will as outlined in 'The Will of the People', which also includes an overview of the extent to which the will has become arguably the most disputed notion in contemporary philosophy and political thought.

created and actively affirmed as the will of the people and, by extension, as a declaration of sovereign authority.<sup>535</sup> Blanqui broadly follows the most salient features of Rousseau's conception of political will: enlightened thought and knowledge; deliberate, voluntary action; collective association, concentration and organisation; constituting and imposing a collective goal, cause or principle; the resources of duty and principle to sustain or preserve this collective volition and popular empowerment.<sup>536</sup> (As noted in Chapter 3, Blanqui also shares what might be seen as a limitation of Rousseau's political will – namely, its confinement to the boundaries of the nation-state.) Before exploring these features I shall first focus on the most basic assumption in Blanqui's account of voluntarism: conscious volition.

### *Conscious volition*

Let us briefly recap the philosophical basis of Blanqui's voluntarism as touched upon in Chapter 1. Blanqui's thought begins with the strict division between the realms of nature and humanity. The capacity for thought is what distinguishes humanity from nature. Reason separates humanity from animals, enabling it to understand society individually and collectively and affording it the capacity, the potential power, to bring society into line with reason itself. To activate this capacity intelligence must be affirmative; it must actively work towards its self-realisation. Blanqui's dualism therefore privileges '*pensée-volonté*' as the force behind socio-political change.<sup>537</sup> An

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<sup>535</sup> Rousseau, 'Discourse on Political Economy', p. 10; *The Social Contract*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>536</sup> Perhaps nowhere else does Blanqui bring these elements together so clearly as in *Le Libérateur*. Equality is, Blanqui writes, 'le principe d'ordre et de justice éternelle, destinée à fermer les plaies hideuses creusées par le privilège ; l'Égalité appelle toutes les vertus et refoule tous les vices. Elle tue l'égoïsme et ne vit que de dévouement ; c'est par le dévouement qu'elle réunit et qu'elle associe les hommes ; c'est par l'intelligence seule qu'elle les gouverne et qu'elle fait concourir leurs efforts à un but commun qui est le bien-être de tous. C'est enfin l'unité et la fraternité qu'elle établit sur la terre, de même que le privilège n'y produit que haine et isolement' (Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', 2 February 1834, *MA*, p. 110). See also Blanqui, 'Instructions pour une prise d'armes', 1868, *MA*, pp. 261-262.

<sup>537</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo 53 [15 April 1868].

active will is a product of enlightened thought, yet enlightened thought cannot but remain mere abstract speculation without the will to materially realise it. And so from Blanqui's dualism emerges the basis of his conception of conscious volition: 'L'œuvre de la nature est fatale et s'accomplit suivant une loi immuable. L'œuvre de la pensée humaine est mobile comme la pensée elle-même et dépend de la volonté, de l'énergie ou de la faiblesse.'<sup>538</sup> A form of dialectical movement between instruction and thought is precisely how a conscious will can be actively encouraged, again as we have already seen.

Although the philosophical grounding of Blanqui's voluntarism only received substantial articulation in the 1860s, its core organising principle can in fact be traced back to his formative political engagements in post-1830 France. Already in 1832 Blanqui carries a basic assumption of all voluntarist politics, if not, one might suggest, of all politics *tout court*: 'nous le pouvons ! si nous le voulons'.<sup>539</sup> In linking *vouloir* and *pouvoir*, willing and doing, Blanqui, after Rousseau, ties collective will to collective capacity. This can be seen to offer greater precision to the earlier assertion from 1831: 'nous la voulons et nous l'aurons'.<sup>540</sup> In affirming the importance of *pouvoir*, of the actual capacity or the doing, Blanqui makes clear that we can will what we are collectively capable of doing. If we have the collective will to realize a goal or end then we can realise it, but its realisation remains at every moment subject to our collective capacity to do so.<sup>541</sup> We are therefore collectively capable of

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<sup>538</sup> Blanqui, 'Développement de l'athéisme', n.d., *NDNM*, p. 46.

<sup>539</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', 2 February 1832, *MA*, p. 98.

<sup>540</sup> Blanqui, 'Déclaration du Comité provisoire des Ecoles', 22 January 1831, *MA*, p. 60. Earlier in the same text, Blanqui writes that students and young people 'ont le droit de s'associer pour diriger leurs efforts vers un but commun, et ils useront de ce droit' (ibid., p. 58). Some of the foundational elements of this Rousseauist conception of political will – the act of association, collectively working towards a common goal – are thus already in place.

<sup>541</sup> As Hallward affirms: 'the practical exercise of will distinguishes itself from mere wish or fantasy through its capacity to initiate a process of genuine "realization"' (Hallward, 'The Will of the People', p. 25). My analysis of the conjunction of *vouloir* and *pouvoir* follows Hallward's discussion of this

realising a goal or project so long as we are prepared to collectively will it. Across the course of his life and work Blanqui would affirm this basic principle again and again, be it in the midst of the upheaval of 1848 or in the seeming impotence of Belgian exile in 1868.<sup>542</sup> Politics means making a choice, deciding to take a principled stand, and then actively willing it. When collectively exercised, subjective determination has the capacity to will and realise any common goal or principle – this is the urgent, sanguine message at the heart of Blanqui's voluntarism.

### *A conflict of wills*

One significant assumption of Blanqui's project is that society comprises a conflict of wills. Unlike nature, established human relations are in no way inevitable, the necessary result of a natural or historical progression and development. All social structures and norms, whether formally enshrined in statute and political institutions or simply upheld in the dominant way of understanding oneself and one's relation to others, derive from a dominant will. For Blanqui the law, as we have already seen, 'est la volonté de celui qui a la force. Reste à savoir si cette volonté est conforme au bien.'<sup>543</sup> It follows that, within Blanqui's view of society as a conscious construction based on specific interests, will serves a particular intellectual conception of how society should best be organised in order to meet those interests. In the case of an oppressive established order, having imposed its will upon the people it will not readily relinquish that dominance – quite the contrary: it actively seeks to neutralise

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issue in 'Willing and able: political will and self-determination', lecture given at the American University in Paris.

<sup>542</sup> See Blanqui, 'Les massacres de Rouen. La Société républicaine centrale au gouvernement provisoire', 2 May 1848, *MA*, p. 142; Blanqui, 'Instructions pour une prise d'armes', *MA*, p. 262. I return to these two examples below.

<sup>543</sup> Blanqui MSS 9586, fo. 402 [n.d.]. See also Blanqui MSS 9590(1) fo. 278 [n.d.]. Cf. Rousseau: 'laws ... are nothing but the record of our acts of will. ... Laws properly speaking are no more than a society's conditions of association' (*The Social Contract*, p. 74).



any popular threats to its power, as Blanqui notes when contemplating the struggles in Saint-Étienne in 1848-49. 'Jamais le capital ne consentira à l'abandon de la moindre parcelle de sa puissance', he writes. 'Il ne veut pas, il ne peut pas faire de concessions.'<sup>544</sup>

An oppressive order's crucial ruse, however, is its ability to pursue its own private interests 'sous prétexte des intérêts généraux'.<sup>545</sup> Further and more damaging still is the conflation in the popular imagination of a consciously organised order based on its own self-interests with a form of natural fate or historical destiny. This strategy has been achieved so successfully that the mechanisms of organisation and will are totally obscured, to the extent that a contingent act of conscious volition becomes perceived as inevitable objective fact. One could say that for Blanqui the oppressor's greatest trick is convincing the world he did not exist.<sup>546</sup> 'L'oppression', Blanqui therefore insists by contrast, 'a triomphé, sans doute, partout et toujours, jusque aujourd'hui, mais non point sans combat.'<sup>547</sup> As with Rousseau and Marx,<sup>548</sup> for Blanqui all forms of hegemonic power, whether that of the rich or of the people, are the product of conscious thought, of conscious will and organisation - that is, of human praxis. All social orders deploy consciously conceived means in the active pursuit of consciously conceived ends. Blanqui even summons a maxim more commonly associated with revolutionary movements in order to bring the oppressive practices and strategies of the established order to the fore. 'Qui veut la fin, veut les moyens', he proclaims. 'Abrutir pour exploiter, amener l'homme à la docilité du

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<sup>544</sup> Capital, Blanqui adds, 'veut avoir raison de l'audace de ses sujets, et en finir avec ces associations qui ont osé mettre une borne à sa puissance' (Blanqui, 'Saint-Étienne: Lutte entre les fabricants et les ouvriers', December 1849, *CSII*, pp. 227-228).

<sup>545</sup> Blanqui, 'Projet de discours', August 1867, *CSII*, p. 153.

<sup>546</sup> For an instructive example of the use of and implied contrast between destiny and conscious organisation, see the assertion: 'La destinée régulière des faibles, leur mission providentielle est de servir de pâture aux forts. La société n'est autre chose que cette anthropophagie organisée' (Blanqui, 'Rapport gigantesque de Thiers sur l'assistance publique', 1850, *CSII*, p. 246).

<sup>547</sup> Blanqui, 'Garnier', July 1870, *CSI*, p. 248.

<sup>548</sup> For Marx on this point see Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*, p. 108.

cheval, telle est la visée sociale' of the oppressor of old and new.<sup>549</sup> The will of the rich acts in the name of oppression, the will of the people in the name of justice; both wills emanate from an intellectual conception of man and society, both serve a particular set of social interests: the privileged and duplicitous few on one hand, the impoverished and oppressed multitude on the other. Again, Blanqui's politics begins with taking the first decisive step and assuming this inevitable conflict of wills; politics means consciously associating, organising and asserting a popular will capable of overcoming the will of the privileged. 'L'ouvrier, par la force de l'union, cesse de subir la volonté de ses anciens dominateurs.'<sup>550</sup> This leads to the question of how this will is formed in the first instance and how it becomes capable of undertaking this task.

*Collective volition as positive and practical exercise*

One of the root causes of the ultimate defeat of July 1830 in Blanqui's eyes was that 'les masses n'avaient exprimé formellement aucune volonté politique positive. Ce qui s'agitait en elles, ce qui les avait jetées sur la place publique,' he suggests, 'c'était la haine des Bourbons, la résolution ferme de les renverser. Il y avait du bonapartisme et de la république dans les vœux qu'elles formaient pour le gouvernement qui devait sortir des barricades.'<sup>551</sup> At least three consequences follow from this assertion. First, an upsurge of defiant indignation or opposition, anti-Bourbonism in the case of 1830, is inadequate when it comes to the subsequent, decisive work of formulating and declaring a collective and egalitarian goal or project, which will require concentrating and organising a power capable of sustaining the initial popular mobilization in order

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<sup>549</sup> Blanqui, 'Discours du fabricant-sénateur Comte de Mimral', February 1866, *CSII*, p. 303. For the same idea with regard to religion, see Blanqui, 'Puissance d'organisation du christianisme', n.d., *NDNM*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>550</sup> Blanqui, 'Saint-Étienne: Lutte entre les fabricants et les ouvriers', *CSII*, pp. 226.

<sup>551</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', *MA*, p. 86.

to collectively determine and realise that project as an act of sovereignty.<sup>552</sup> In Blanqui's eyes opposition to hereditary monarchy is not, by extension, an affirmation or exercise of justice, freedom and equality, as the people discovered in the wake of July when their fellow enemies of the Restoration, the bourgeoisie, simply replaced one despotism of private interests with another upon seizing power. A genuine act of popular will, Blanqui reasons, is capable of articulating what it stands for and implementing it. By clearly stating its principles a collective actor will also create a rupture and force the taking of sides, thereby exposing those who oppose and seek to repress and deceive it. In July, however, the people did not go beyond anti-Bourbonism in order to form, declare and enforce a collective will as sovereign, nor, more decisively, did they believe or know themselves to be capable of constituting and sustaining that power themselves - hence their inability to distinguish between their genuine allies and enemies; hence their readiness, having offered alliance with and accepted the leadership of their adversaries, to put down their arms and willingly surrender their concentrated and collective power to the bourgeois usurpers; and hence their transformation, following the bourgeois betrayal, from an active, empowered and concentrated force to a passive, inert and divided spectator to the drama in which they previously had the leading and decisive role.<sup>553</sup> However resolute and courageous, popular mobilisation can only lead to popular empowerment if it is driven by the will to formulate and then realise a project based on collective interests.

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<sup>552</sup> As Rousseau states: 'a will is either general, or it is not; it is the will of the body of the people, or of a part only. In the first case, this will, once declared, is an act of sovereignty and has legal authority' (Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 64).

<sup>553</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', *MA*, pp. 85-87. Blanqui would later lament that 'si la révolution avait fait son devoir en 1830, en 1848, ce demi-siècle si tristement perdu aurait suffi pour toucher le but' (Blanqui, *Le communisme, avenir de la société*, 1869-70, *CSI*, p. 182).

Blanqui extends these principles to form a broader - and particularly stimulating - critique of resistance to injustice as merely a minimal level of political engagement. On many occasions the term is invoked as a necessary though ultimately unsubstantial endeavour, often accompanying a depiction of resignation ('même la pensée d'une résistance'; 'l'idée seule de la résistance'; 'une ombre de résistance').<sup>554</sup> Far from being an end, resistance is and can only ever remain a beginning. Resistance must be linked 'to the practice of emancipation. If resistance is defined first and foremost as resistance to oppression, domination or coercion,' Hallward recently asserted, 'then engagement in resistance would itself involve some appeal to the normative criteria of freedom and the work of self-liberation.'<sup>555</sup> A note from the *Critique Sociale* lucidly illustrates Hallward's point. A strike, Blanqui writes, 'c'est l'idée simple, la résistance à l'oppression. Tous s'y rallient.' Blanqui even goes so far as describing a strike as 'la seule arme vraiment populaire dans la lutte contre le capital'. And yet precisely because they can but remain a temporary form of mass resistance to the structures of capitalist exploitation, strikes – much like revolutionary seizures of power – are not ends in themselves so much as an initial means of popular mobilisation through which to further assemble, concentrate and then organise the popular power and political process through which capital can be overthrown and enduring social justice created. 'Appuyées provisoirement sur la grève comme moyen défensif contre l'oppression du capital,' Blanqui explains, 'les masses populaires doivent concentrer tous leurs efforts vers les changements politiques, reconnu seuls capables d'opérer une transformation sociale et la répartition des produits selon la justice.'<sup>556</sup> At stake in militant politics, Blanqui is right to affirm, is far more than an

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<sup>554</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 466-467 [June 1850]; 9590(2), fo. 369 [6 September 1852].

<sup>555</sup> Hallward, 'Defiance or emancipation?', p. 25.

<sup>556</sup> Blanqui, 'Grève et coopération', October 1867, *CSII*, pp. 166-167. 'The strength of the people,' Rousseau similarly recognises, 'is effective only when it is concentrated: it is dissipated and lost when

ephemeral rupture in the prevailing order of domination but actually forming and exercising a collective, organised power from which to overcome the order of domination as such. This is precisely why, as Blanqui notes, the concentrated will of ‘les masses populaires’ poses such a threat to the established order of privilege and private interests. It explains why the forces of oppression seek to maintain the workers in their ‘individualité d’atome’, content with the so-called freedom of individual interests; it is why when it becomes a question of ‘un peu de véritable liberté, qu’on réclame en son nom la faculté d’associer ses efforts contre l’oppression industrielle du capital, on prétend l’isoler dans son impuissance individuelle.’<sup>557</sup> The established order and the exercise of exploitative social relations rely on an uninformed, passive, unorganised and divided population.<sup>558</sup>

Just as momentary disruptions to an established power are inadequate when compared with the real, decisive work of establishing and exercising power itself, Blanqui adds that emancipatory politics is not a matter of making demands to and receiving concessions from an established power but of the people, a voluntary association of individuals, organising and imposing their own collective power so as to formulate and assert common not private interests as the fundamental, guiding principle of social arrangements. Those who think the privileged would step forward as the agents of change to in any way compromise a system from which they prosper are under the sway of naïve fantasy. History and its political struggles are Blanqui’s witness to this. In 1789 had the people humbly begged the nobility to relinquish their

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spread out, like the force of gunpowder, which ignites only in the mass, and not when it is scattered on the ground’ (Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, pp. 115-116).

<sup>557</sup> Blanqui, ‘Les articles 415 et 416 contre les coalitions’, 1849, *CSII*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>558</sup> ‘Ce qu’il faut à ce parti, c’est abrutissement des masses. L’exploitation n’est possible qu’à ce prix. Des animaux stupides, dociles et infatigables, tel est le personnel populaire. A créer pour le maintien de l’ordre social’ (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 87 [16 March 1866]).

feudal rights they would have been punished for insolence.<sup>559</sup> The passing of historical time did not change the terms of the political struggle. ‘Ils sont furieux de recevoir la loi des ouvriers’, Blanqui notes with regard to the factory owners in Saint-Étienne half a century later having to comply with the ‘puissance nouvelle’ of the workers’ association, *Société populaire*, and prophesising the city’s ruin as a result. Why did this cause such fury? Quite simply because the rule of the people defies the most basic existing relations of power. When it came to legislation hitherto the factory owners ‘étaient habitués à la faire. C’est la condition de l’ordre social actuel. Le capital commande et n’obéit pas. Dès qu’il ne peut plus dominer, il crie à l’oppression. La liberté pour lui, c’est le pouvoir absolu. Il n’admet d’autres rapports avec le travail que ceux de maître à esclave.’<sup>560</sup> For Blanqui the law, properly understood, is an act of the general will. As he said of the people in 1832: ‘Il veut faire et il fera les lois qui doivent le régir : alors ces lois ne seront plus faites contre lui ; elles seront faites pour lui parce qu’elles le seront par lui.’<sup>561</sup>

The second point that emerges from Blanqui’s analysis of the failure of July 1830 is the belief that political will must forever remain linked to its practical exercise. Like Rousseau and the Jacobins before him, Blanqui’s ‘volonté positive’ denotes the actual, material realisation of a capacity. Recall that according to the maxim ‘nous le pouvons ! si nous le voulons’ the capacity to realise freedom and equality is dependent on the capacity to will it. Insofar as a collective group is unified and organised, determined and resolute in the willing of a goal or ideal it is capable of doing so. (As we have seen, Blanqui sees Paris as having the concentrated capacities

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<sup>559</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, 12 January 1832, *MA*, p. 70.

<sup>560</sup> Blanqui, Blanqui, ‘Saint-Étienne: Lutte entre les fabricants et les ouvriers’, *CSII*, p. 226.

<sup>561</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 71. Cf. ‘Will commands the initiation of action, not representation. An exercise in political will involves taking power, not receiving it, on the assumption that (as a matter of ‘reason’ or ‘natural right’) the people are always already entitled to take it’ (Hallward, ‘The Will of the People’, p. 23).

to realise their collective will and impose it on the country as a whole.) And the practical work of willing would continue to guide the post-revolutionary social order, Blanqui contends, as he sets out in the broadest of terms the manner in which an enlightened popular will would be exercised and would see to the organisation of socio-economic and political relations. After the work of popular enlightenment was completed – a problematic issue to which we shall return below – an enlightened general will could govern society through the free, active and enlightened citizenry of whom it would be constituted. ‘Tous les travailleurs, devenus, d’instruments passifs, des citoyens éclairés,’ Blanqui describes, reaffirming the centrality of ‘*pensée-volonté*’ as the dual process of collective empowerment and emancipation, ‘associeraient spontanément leurs intelligences et leurs bras, et le problème de l’organisation du travail selon la justice se trouverait résolu.’<sup>562</sup> The ‘*grande association*’<sup>563</sup> of the people, ‘la démocratie entière, sans distinction de nuances’,<sup>564</sup> as Blanqui later describes it, would empower and thereby realise the capacity for popular self-determination, enabling general interests to prevail over private interests in the arrangement of social and economic life. ‘Créations industrielles, travaux publics, seront l’œuvre féconde de la volonté générale, et non plus le jeu ruineux de la spéculation ou du pouvoir absolu.’<sup>565</sup> Communism, ‘l’association intégrale’,<sup>566</sup> is the

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<sup>562</sup> Blanqui, ‘Projet de discours’, *CSII*, p. 154. The general outline of an emancipated society found in the *Formulaire de Réception à la Société des Saisons* of 1837 again attests to Rousseau’s legacy. Indeed, in many ways the text effectively amounts to a faithful restatement of Rousseau’s political theory: the revolutionary overthrow of royalty and the destruction of aristocracy and privilege will establish the ‘gouvernement du peuple par lui-même’, a republic founded on equality, imposing equal duties (‘L’obéissance à la volonté générale, le dévouement à la patrie, et à la fraternité envers chaque membre de la nation’) and according equal rights (‘Le droit à l’existence, à la condition du travail’, ‘Le droit à l’éducation’ and ‘Le droit électoral’) to each person. Only those who fulfill their duties to the social body in turn receive rights from it; only those who participate in and thus actively constitute the sovereign authority form citizens (as individuals) and the people (as a collective). The law ‘n’est autre chose que l’expression de la volonté générale’, and which is prepared by a chamber of deputies before being submitted before the people for approval or rejection. See ‘Formulaire de réception à la Société des Saisons’, 1837, *OI*, pp. 382-383.

<sup>563</sup> Blanqui, ‘Projet de discours’, *CSII*, pp. 151, 153.

<sup>564</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 181.

<sup>565</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le luxe’, n.d., *CSI*, p. 109.

name of the only possible social organisation which can establish ‘l’égalité absolue, moyen unique de concilier les impérieuses prétentions de tous’,<sup>567</sup> for if freedom means ‘[la] parité sociale entre les individus ... il suit que la liberté a pour limite l’égalité.’ Therein lies the conjuncture within Rousseau’s thought between the individual and the social body of which the individual constitutes: only the common and complete association of individuals can at once allow individual freedom to flourish and protect every individual from the egoist private interests of individualism.<sup>568</sup> Much like Rousseau’s balance sheet on the civil state,<sup>569</sup> Blanqui sees the loss of a certain kind of freedom as the means to gain another. Just as Rousseau maintains that ‘to be driven by our appetites alone is slavery, while to obey a law that we have imposed on ourselves is freedom’,<sup>570</sup> Blanqui too prioritises the freedom from oppression and domination over the so-called freedom of individual gain and egoist self-enrichment through the exploitation of others.<sup>571</sup> Hence the reign of individualism is that of ‘l’ignorance, de la sauvagerie (et de la bestialité)’,<sup>572</sup> while only ‘l’Humanité, être multiple’<sup>573</sup> can solve the problems of society and emancipate all its individual members. But that is not to say that economic and political association can be the result of coercion or compulsion: ‘il faut déclarer nettement que nul ne pourra jamais être forcé de s’adjoindre avec son champ à une association quelconque, et que, s’il y entre, ce sera toujours de sa pleine et libre volonté.’<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>566</sup> Blanqui, ‘Capital et travail’, n.d., p. 74; ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 189. It is instructive to note that Blanqui also speaks of ‘l’association intégrale de tout le pays’. See Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 210.

<sup>567</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 212.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>569</sup> ‘What man loses by the social contract is his natural freedom and an unlimited right to anything by which he is tempted and can obtain; what he gains is his civil freedom and the right of property over everything that he possesses’ (Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 59).

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>571</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, pp. 187-188.

<sup>572</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 58-59 [15 March 1869].

<sup>573</sup> Blanqui, ‘L’usure’, n.d., pp. 45-46.

<sup>574</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 210.



Blanqui is forever emphatic that genuine political subjectivity begins with genuine freedom – that is, with conscious volition. The act of collective association is a product of individual voluntary choice and conscious decision, or it is not.<sup>575</sup> The ‘œuvre commune’<sup>576</sup> of association is, by definition, a collective activity. The one exception to this, the groups who cannot be part of the will of the people in this sense, are those who seek to deceive and oppress the people; these groups will be forced to either submit to the rule of the sovereignty of people or be punished as usurpers and enemies of the people.<sup>577</sup>

An actual, collective process of political willing therefore cannot preconceive the actual form its ends will take. Politics, for Blanqui, is the voluntary process of collectively working towards the realisation of a guiding ideal; it is an activity that must be practised, a goal that must be pursued. Only on the road to the new society, only in ‘agissant toujours dans le but final du triomphe de l’égalité’,<sup>578</sup> will its actual form become apparent.<sup>579</sup> Again, these are the grounds from which Blanqui rejects advancing ‘une formule, une administration, un système, une réglementation’<sup>580</sup> of an imagined future society in the manner of Fourier, Saint Simon and Cabet, the latter of which ‘a eu précisément le tort d’assimiler l’idéal régulier de l’avenir aux hypothèses en l’air des révélateurs de pacotille.’<sup>581</sup> Like Marx, Blanqui’s communism, by contrast, is not preconceived or imposed *a priori* as if emanating from some higher authority. ‘On se borne à prédire qu’il sera le résultat infaillible de l’instruction

<sup>575</sup> Blanqui, ‘Les sectes et la révolution’, October 1866, *CSII*, p. 116.

<sup>576</sup> Blanqui, ‘Qui fait la soupe doit la manger’, March 1834, *OI*, p. 295.

<sup>577</sup> See ‘Formulaire de réception à la Société des Saisons’, *OI*, p. 383.

<sup>578</sup> Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 112. See also Blanqui, ‘L’impôt progressif’, 1867, *CSII*, p. 38.

<sup>579</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Les sectes et la révolution’, *CSII*, p. 116.

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>581</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, pp. 198-199.

universalisée.’<sup>582</sup> The ‘mirage fantastique des programmes, ces brouillards du royaume d’Utopie’ must be well and truly abandoned for the realm of the real; revolutionaries had to ‘[sortir] du roman pour rentrer dans la réalité’, focusing all their energy and efforts on the work of practical, organised revolutionary politics here and today. ‘Le reste’, Blanqui adds, ‘n’est plus de notre compétence.’<sup>583</sup> Emancipation is, for Blanqui, the result of a series of conscious decisions and actions. ‘It is the process of actively willing or choosing that renders a particular course of action preferable to another’, Hallward similarly maintains. ‘It is the active willing which determines what is possible and what is right, and makes it so.’<sup>584</sup> Only through the exercise of collective voluntary action can the capacity for such activity be proven and the possible ends of such a capacity be determined and realised.<sup>585</sup>

The final point is more implicit and returns us to the question of leadership. Having spoken critically in February 1832 of the extent to which July did not go beyond anti-Bourbonism, Blanqui reiterates this point in 1834 when looking back on the political sequence inaugurated by the *Trois Glorieuses*: ‘les diverses manifestations populaires, loin d’avoir pour but le renversement de la dynastie, ne tendaient qu’à l’éclairer. Il est constant que ni en décembre 1830, ni en février, juin et septembre 1831, l’idée de détruire la monarchie nouvelle n’était entrée dans l’esprit

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<sup>582</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 189. On this point see also Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, pp. 107-109 and Blanqui, ‘Sur la révolution’, 1850, p. 164.

<sup>583</sup> Blanqui, ‘À propos des clameurs contre l’*Avis au peuple*’, April 1851, *MA*, p. 170; Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 196. See also the assertion that since ignorance reigns over France renders it ‘impossible’ to clearly see ‘la solution du problème social. Entre ce qui est et ce qui veut être,’ Blanqui contends, ‘il existe une distance si prodigieuse que la pensée n’arrive pas à la franchir’ (ibid., p. 211).

<sup>584</sup> Hallward, ‘The Will of the People’, pp. 20-21, 23.

<sup>585</sup> Such are the terms by which Blanqui distinguishes his political priorities from the speculative, passive utopianism of his contemporaries, as he figuratively illustrates in one particularly memorable image. ‘Communisme et Proudhonisme se disputent avec acharnement, au bord d’un fleuve, pour décider si l’autre rive est un champ de maïs ou un champ de blé’, Blanqui writes. ‘Ils s’entêtent à résoudre la question avant de franchir l’obstacle. Eh! passons d’abord ! Nous verrons là-bas !’ (Blanqui, *CSII*, 1850s, p. 314).

du peuple.<sup>586</sup> During 1830 and its aftermath the people, lacking confidence in its collective capacity, dissipated their assembled and unified force, willingly surrendering their concentrated and collective power to the bourgeois usurpers. Blanqui believes that this fatal mistake would not have happened if it had had time to find its ‘chefs naturels ... qui auraient donné cours à sa victoire’<sup>587</sup> A popular force, if it is to form successfully and impose its power, cannot be blind energy. The will of the people needs encouragement, direction and guidance. The people must know that the exercise of its power is sovereign and it must know how to exercise that power. The role of leadership is thus to inform the people that it has the collective capacities necessary for its own empowerment; the people must be told of the possibility of its own power. ‘Il est temps enfin de faire connaître aux peuples leur position réelle,’ Blanqui writes, ‘de leur apprendre comment ils peuvent conquérir et conserver leurs droits, de les éclairer sur leurs intérêts, sur le mode de gouvernement qui leur convient le mieux, et qui seul peut assurer leur bien-être.’<sup>588</sup>

### **How to continue**

#### *Overcoming obstacles and resistance*

Blanqui’s project is concerned with foregrounding the paths to an unknown and unknowable destination. Understanding the approaching obstacles and barriers the paths will present, along with the requirements for their successful negotiation, are therefore both vital considerations. If an emancipated, egalitarian society ‘se forme peu à peu par l’affluent de mille sources, de milliards de gouttes d’eau’, the task of the revolutionary is clear: ‘Abaissez les obstacles, créez-lui une pente, mais n’ayez

<sup>586</sup> Blanqui, ‘Pourquoi il n’y a plus d’émeutes’, 2 February 1834, *OI*, p. 269.

<sup>587</sup> Blanqui, ‘Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple’, *MA*, p. 85.

<sup>588</sup> Blanqui, ‘L’aristocratie et le peuple’, July 1831, *OI*, pp. 167-168, 169.

pas la prétention de créer le fleuve.<sup>589</sup> Since obstacles and resistance are only overcome when directly confronted and actively negotiated, the emergence of obstacles and resistance is itself a crucial issue for Blanqui. Blanqui here again follows Rousseau's recognition that 'the sole means that [men] have of preserving themselves is to create, by combination, a totality of forces sufficient to overcome the obstacles resisting them, to direct their operation by a single impulse, and make them act in unison'.<sup>590</sup> Yet Blanqui radicalises Rousseau's assumptions regarding both the inevitability of resistance and the demands of overcoming it. The century separating the two thinkers, the differing pressures and priorities of two distinct sets of historical circumstances, without question drove Blanqui to pursue the point to a greater degree than Rousseau before him. The political struggles, and failures, of the nineteenth century informed and continually reinforced Blanqui's persistent preoccupation with the question of how to organise and impose a collective will and common goal or cause in the face of those dominant groups and private interests that will inevitably work, with all the resources at their disposal, to impede, contain, deceive and divide it. For Blanqui any political analysis essentially boils down to comprehending the balance of forces between the people and the privileged few. In this respect an established power's response to the people is of particular interest to him. The fear of the people is the key to understanding the reaction of those whose interests are threatened by that very people.<sup>591</sup> To understand the politics of the July Monarchy, he told an audience in 1832, is to identify the spectre that haunts it, the people of 1830, since just one popular victory is all it took, and all it *will* take, for the established order to break, such is the potential political force of popular empowerment.<sup>592</sup> Hence

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<sup>589</sup> Blanqui, 'Les sectes et la révolution', *CSII*, p. 115.

<sup>590</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 54.

<sup>591</sup> Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', 6 June 1852, *MA*, p. 186.

<sup>592</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', *MA*, p. 92.

the imperative, on the part of the government, to cover up its inconveniently insurrectionary genesis and delegitimise the origins of its own power.<sup>593</sup> Blanqui indeed describes at length the Orléanist government's attempts to derail the forward march of the revolution and their need to not appear openly hostile when working, both independently and with their foreign allies, to contain the threat posed by 'le peuple de Juillet' so as not to provoke another popular uprising.<sup>594</sup> In attempting to establish its control and satisfy the European monarchs' demand to disempower the French people, the government tentatively began to 'amortir l'enthousiasme, décourager les patriotes et jeter la défiance et la discorde dans la nation.'<sup>595</sup> The kings of Europe granted Louis-Philippe time 'pour augmenter le découragement du peuple, le dégoûter de la révolution, et le frapper d'inertie.'<sup>596</sup> Beyond regretfully having to concede the government's success in containing and neutralizing this revolutionary passion, thereby preventing a second revolution,<sup>597</sup> the wider implication for Blanqui's thought is the belief that self-confidence, unity, energy and enthusiasm are all essential for the people to become a revolutionary force capable of prevailing over its adversaries. Revolution in this sense is an act requiring concentrated, guided energy to conceive and thereafter nourish it if the stagnation, containment and division to which its past defeats are owed are to be successfully avoided.

The extent to which the assembled power of the people would be met by the power of those threatened by that emergent group, such that revolution would invariably incite counter-revolution, remained a key concern of Blanqui's in the wake of the July Revolution. What, Blanqui asks, is necessary for the concentrated creative

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<sup>593</sup> See H.A.C. Collingham, *The July Monarchy: A Political History of France 1830-1848* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 39, 109.

<sup>594</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', *MA*, p. 95.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97. See also Blanqui, 'Lettre à Adelaïde de Montgolfier', 31 July 1832, *OI*, p. 233.

<sup>597</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', *MA*, p. 96.

energy of popular mobilisation to be successfully converted into a concrete and generalised set of egalitarian and democratic socio-political relations? Just as obstacles will continue to appear in the struggle for equality and justice, Blanqui responded, the people must continue in the work of overcoming them; only a determined popular movement can surmount the barriers that will block its path. It is only in the collective willing towards the end that the obstacles to its realisation – the certain difficulties, the potential defeats - will be overcome. ‘Il faut marcher’, Blanqui declares; ‘quand les masses rencontrent un obstacle, elles s’arrêtent, s’amoncellent et le renversent. C’est l’histoire du passé, c’est aussi celle de l’avenir.’<sup>598</sup> Resolute determination in the pursuit of a common goal is precisely the great achievement of February 1848 when, ‘après trois jours de résistance’, the people, ordinary individuals without wealth or power, together had ‘contraint la garde bourgeoise à subir la République’.<sup>599</sup> 1848 would also demonstrate, however, that as an initial mobilisation takes hold, as a popular movement advances, radicalises and the stakes are raised, resistance will remain forthcoming. In the wake of a political revolution those who sought to exploit, oppress and manipulate the people for their own personal gain would not simply disappear. On the contrary, as long as the people remain unenlightened and thus unaware of these dangers, counter-revolutionary forces will appear and attempt to reassert their control.<sup>600</sup> And where manipulation is not employed, the force of arms readily will be. April 1834, June 1848, March 1871 – all showed the forceful resistance that any popular movement threatening the established interests of the status quo will continually face. Overall Blanqui therefore sees only the concentrated, organised (and enlightened) armed Parisian masses as capable of

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<sup>598</sup> Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 115.

<sup>599</sup> Blanqui, ‘Les massacres de Rouen. La Société républicaine centrale au gouvernement provisoire’, *MA*, p. 142.

<sup>600</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 184.

overcoming the resistance a revolution will face. This is one of the key messages of the *Instructions pour une prise d'armes* – a text explicitly conceived as a purely practical solution to a purely practical problem.<sup>601</sup> No government forces could withstand the collective power of the unified and organised people of Paris collectively and consciously working towards the same goal: 'l'aspect d'une armée parisienne en bon ordre, manœuvrant selon les règles de la tactique, frappera les soldats de stupeur et fera tomber leur résistance.'<sup>602</sup> Or as Blanqui put it most emphatically earlier in 1851: 'En présence des prolétaires armés, obstacles, résistances, impossibilités, tout disparaîtra.'<sup>603</sup>

*Moral duty, resolute commitment*

Blanqui is, then, in no way ignorant of the difficulties facing a process of popular empowerment. On the contrary, it is precisely because of acknowledging these difficulties that he emphasises the collective will to overcome them. But the fundamental necessity of actively pursuing a goal in the face of obstacles and resistance nonetheless also inevitably invites the question of the requirements and motivations, both individual and collective, of this activity itself. If emancipation is a project achieved only through the concrete efforts and actions of humans in the face of barriers and direct opposition then one must be prepared to see to this task of practical realisation with all the courageous determination the process will continually demand. The overcoming of obstacles and resistance must be nourished by a

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<sup>601</sup> See Blanqui, 'Instructions pour une prise d'armes', *MA*, p. 257.

<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262. As noted in the previous chapter, 'force' denotes an empowered and - as Blanqui insists even more so after June 1848 - *organised* collective actor imposing its will in the face of obstacles and resistance. It is in this sense that we should read the insistence that in the face of well-armed and well-organised government troops 'la force est la seule garantie de la liberté' (*ibid.*, pp. 262-263).

<sup>603</sup> Blanqui, 'Avis au peuple', *MA*, p. 167. The public statement released during the failed uprising of May 1839 contains a similar, though arguably less powerful, formulation: 'Peuple, lève-toi ! et tes ennemis disparaîtront comme la poussière devant l'ouragan' ('Appel au peuple de Paris du comité de la Société des Saisons', *MA*, p. 130).

conviction, a clear and conscious sense of moral duty and purpose from which emerges a resolute determination to prevail.

Blanqui's insistence on duty - so central to and characteristic of his conception of voluntarist politics<sup>604</sup> - as well as on resolute commitment and a sense of purpose, arises from an acute awareness of the difficulties facing radical emancipatory movements. The 'realization' of the principles of the sovereignty of the people and equality 'n'est pas facile', the *Formulaire de Réception à la Société des Saisons* of 1837 readily concedes; 'nos ennemis sont nombreux et puissants ; ils ont à leur disposition toutes les forces sociales ... nous n'avons que notre courage et notre bon droit'.<sup>605</sup> Of course, the importance of an organised popular force and the other defining elements of Blanqui's insurrectionary practice often take centre stage in his statements regarding the strategic imperatives of a popular uprising. But Blanqui always builds such pronouncements on a more fundamental set of moral principles and subjective resources that serve to guide individual and collective political engagement. 'La sobriété, le courage, la force, le dévouement' – these, according to the *Formulaire de réception de la Société des Familles* of 1834, are the 'vertus' of a true republican.<sup>606</sup> 'Le savoir, l'intelligence, la magnanimité, le dévouement, la vertu' are in fact, Blanqui later observed, the 'ennemis privilégiés' of those who seek to

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<sup>604</sup> Blanqui's first notable articulation of a revolutionary duty was in the 1832 defence speech when he spoke of the duty for all men of 'cœur et intelligence' to call the masses to overthrow the poverty and ignominy oppressing them, and of the commitment to such a duty regardless of external constraints like imprisonment. See Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze', *MA*, pp. 67-68. Maillard would later receive a similar message regarding the necessity of subjective commitment in order to confront and negotiate all the difficulties and seeming impasses any emancipatory political process will hold. 'Les esprits fermes savent naviguer au travers de ces obstacles qu'il n'est donné à personne de supprimer, et qu'il est possible à tous d'éviter ou de franchir', Blanqui affirms. 'Sachons donc nous plier à la nécessité et, tout en déplorant le mal, n'en laisser ralentir notre marche.' To ensure the point is not overlooked, such is its importance, Blanqui repeats: 'l'homme vraiment politique ne tient pas compte de ces entraves et va droit devant lui, sans s'inquiéter autrement des cailloux qui sèment la route' (Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', *MA*, p. 174).

<sup>605</sup> 'Formulaire de réception à la Société des Saisons', *OI*, p. 383.

<sup>606</sup> 'Formulaire de réception de la Société des Familles', July-August 1834, *OI*, p. 298.



repress, divide and deceive the people both before and after the revolutionary rupture.<sup>607</sup>

The moral dimension of Blanqui's conception of duty is indeed essential. Though this anticipates parts of the next chapter a few initial remarks should be made here. 'La morale est de toute évidence le fondement des sociétés', Blanqui claims.<sup>608</sup> Fundamentally, however, there is no such thing as eternal or fixed morals, he adds; the belief that human beings possess an innate morality serves only as justification for the status quo and all its injustices. Morality varies according to time and place. History reveals morals to be always, first, a direct emanation of – and so proportional to – the wider level of intellectual enlightenment and, second, acquired and achieved not through divine revelation or historical destiny but through the didactic process of human cognition and thus through humanity itself. As morals are strictly dependent on 'des variations intellectuelles', it follows that '[s]i la lumière s'éteint, la morale' – that is, enlightened morality – 'disparaît avec elle.'<sup>609</sup> Contrary to the spiritualist assertion of the invariability of morality and duty alongside it, for Blanqui both morality and duty change and can be changed through the material process of cognition outlined in Chapter 1.<sup>610</sup>

Here the role of an intellectual elite seems to reappear. Those who have already achieved the necessary level of enlightenment, Blanqui appears to suggest, are able to act with devotion and a sense of duty to their cause, which is itself the cause of engendering enlightened morality through enlightened instruction. In fact, the

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<sup>607</sup> Blanqui, 'Malfaisance de l'Eglise', *NDNM*, p. 62. See also Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, pp. 186-187.

<sup>608</sup> Blanqui, 'Candide', 3 May 1865, *MA*, p. 247.

<sup>609</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 162-163 [n.d.]. Morality, Blanqui explains elsewhere, 'fleur de l'arbre de la pensée, n'est que l'expression plus ou moins puissante de l'instinct humanitaire qui défend aux hommes de s'entreuire et leur commande de s'entraider' (Blanqui, 'Candide', *MA*, p. 248).

<sup>610</sup> 'Fausseté de l'idée d'une morale fine, invariable, éternelle, qui a proclamé ou prescrit dès l'origine des devoirs de l'homme', Blanqui writes. 'L'idée du devoir, expression et résumé de la morale est mobile comme elle et se règle sur sa marche' (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 74 [n.d.]).

undetermined nature of human affairs is such that only through voluntarist devotion and dedication could enlightened thought be guided to the cause of equality: ‘l’on n’arrive à l’égalité que par le dévouement ; le dévouement seul prête à la pensée cette puissance irrésistible qui commande au monde.’<sup>611</sup> Equality’s defining principles of enlightened thought and duty are indeed the very means through which it will be animated and implemented, converting the ideal into the real. The conscious and active commitment to equality is how the principle itself ‘réunit’ and ‘associe les hommes ; c’est par l’intelligence seule qu’elle les gouverne et qu’elle fait concourir leurs efforts à un but commun qui est le bien-être de tous.’<sup>612</sup> Morality, and humanity with it, can therefore be lifted to great heights through the work of enlightened education, achieving the ‘sentiment de justice’, social solidarity, and uniting the people under a collective project for the common good, or be plunged to the depths of barbaric egoism through the propagation of ignorance.<sup>613</sup> Again as we noted in Chapter 1 Blanqui is in fact quite explicit that emancipatory politics is a profoundly moral project, as such the violation of this enlightened morality is what commands its redress.<sup>614</sup> Hitherto immorality has prevailed for the reasons Blanqui takes from Rousseau outlined earlier – namely, usurpation, domination and, above all, deceit. Those who have already attained the sufficient level of knowledge to see through such deceit and deception, who know and understand that injustice presupposes ignorance of its existence, are morally obliged to expose this state of affairs. And so a practical imperative, a revolutionary duty, emerges: ‘Il faut lutter sans relâche contre l’ignorance, d’abord, pour maintenir la morale à sa hauteur présente, ensuite, pour en

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<sup>611</sup> Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 113.

<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>613</sup> Blanqui 9590(1) fo. 181 [14 April 1869]; Blanqui, ‘Candide’, *MA*, pp. 248-249.

<sup>614</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 251-252, 253 [n.d.].

élever le niveau en développement les connaissances acquises et poussant les conquêtes de la pensée.’<sup>615</sup>

From this insistence on moral duty follows the assumption that at all times and in all circumstances, a revolutionary must be prepared to sacrifice wealth and well-being, to face imprisonment, to even lay down their life in their commitment to their convictions. To follow one’s ‘devoir’ is, for Blanqui, necessarily to go ‘jusqu’au bout’.<sup>616</sup> Blanqui does not shirk at affirming the full implications of this measure of political commitment, this standard by which to live: ‘Le devoir d’un révolutionnaire, c’est la lutte toujours, la lutte quand même, la lutte jusqu’à extinction.’<sup>617</sup> Furthermore, according to Blanqui strength of intellectual conviction confers strength of political force, both individually and collectively. Unlike government troops fighting under constraint and compulsion amongst the popular ranks ‘on se bat pour une idée. Là, on ne trouve que des volontaires, et leur mobile est l’enthousiasme, non la peur.’<sup>618</sup> This is why Blanqui ardently rejected the suggestion that Gustave Tridon and the other youngsters who comprised ‘le mouvement politique et philosophique du quartier Latin’ were ‘des automates’, that the group was a ‘une réunion de machins, obéissant en aveugles à un mot d’ordre’. The reality was in fact quite the contrary, Blanqui claims: ‘Ils ont des idées, des caractères, des passions, et ces passions, ces

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<sup>615</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 162-163 [n.d.].

<sup>616</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze’, *MA*, pp. 67-68. One discovers in a manuscript note Blanqui lamenting the lack of unapologetic self-sacrifice, the complete renouncement of all self-interest, attributing to it the cause of returning defeat: ‘Le repentir (et) le remords sont faits pour les gens qui sacrifient leurs convictions à leur intérêt, et non pour ceux qui sacrifient leurs intérêts et même la vie à leurs convictions. Et cependant ces derniers sont presque toujours à la merci des premières. Ainsi vont les choses humaines. Le triomphe du mal en est l’ordre (règle) presque habituel’ (Blanqui MSS 9586, fo 402 [n.d.]. See also ‘Formulaire de réception à la Société des Saisons’, *OI*, p. 383).

<sup>617</sup> Blanqui, ‘Instructions pour une prise d’armes’, *MA*, p. 263. Cf. ‘The duty of every revolutionary is to make revolution’ (Fidel Castro, ‘Second Declaration of Havana’, in Fidel Castro, *The Declarations of Havana*, ed. Tariq Ali [London: Verso, 2008], p. 117; translation modified).

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

caractères, ces idées, peuvent et doivent souvent entrer en lutte'.<sup>619</sup> This insistence on individual volition towards a collective goal as a fundamental characteristic of a revolutionary actor becomes even clearer when contrasted with the assertion that the 'qualité essentielle' of a government soldier is 'l'obéissance passive, l'abdication de toute individualité'. Never seeking explanation of their actions, never passing comment on the situation, the distance between the government soldier and the revolutionary, particularly when considered in light of the description of Tridon's group in which the same terms are evoked, is striking. 'Sous le nom de soldats, on prétend fabriquer des machines ambulantes et frappantes, des porte-fusils muets et aveugles, des automates sans souvenir et sans avenir, sans patrie et sans famille, sans pitié et sans remords.'<sup>620</sup> For Blanqui the militant devoted to an idea and principle has, precisely by virtue of their voluntary decision to become a militant and to resolutely persevere as such, all the resources necessary for the triumph of that cause. 'Supérieurs à l'adversaire par le dévouement, ils le sont bien plus encore par l'intelligence. Ils l'emportent sur lui dans l'ordre moral et même physique, par la conviction, la vigueur, la fertilité des ressources, la vivacité de corps et d'esprit ; ils ont la tête et le cœur. Nulle troupe au monde n'égale ces hommes d'élite.' Although during the course of an insurrection the number of leaders that come forward may be fewer than would be hoped for, as long as the people are organised around a idea, '[l]e zèle, l'ardeur, l'intelligence des volontaires, compenseront ce déficit.'<sup>621</sup>

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<sup>619</sup> Blanqui MSS 9589, fo. 123 [n.d.].

<sup>620</sup> Blanqui MSS 9583, fo. 23 [1848].

<sup>621</sup> Blanqui, 'Instructions pour une prise d'armes', *MA*, pp. 261-262, 263-264. This theme is already present in Blanqui's early writings. When speaking of the enemy in 1831 he writes that 'la seule chose qu'ils redoutent, l'énergie de leurs adversaires. Il n'y que la peur qui ait prise sur de telle âmes, et je ne veux pas m'enlever le seul auxiliaire que nous ayons réellement. N'en avez-vous par déjà assez vu pour être bien persuadée que rien de noble, de généreux, ni d'humain ne saurait avoir accès dans ces cœurs-là ?' (Blanqui, 'Lettre à Adelaïde de Montgolfier', 25 August 1831, *OI*, p. 180). Similarly in *Le Libérateur* he suggests that in the duel between privilege and equality, the former is 'impuissant à lutter de front parce qu'il se sent écrasé de la supériorité morale de son adversaire' (Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 110).

At least two interlinked points might be inferred from the elements above. First, according to Blanqui any *true* sense of duty to will an idea can be in no way involuntary. Revolutionary duty and the courage, self-sacrifice, discipline and honour it inspires must be a product of conscious volition, of rationally acquired knowledge and deliberate action, for this is indeed its source of decisive power over the resistance their cause will confront. Second, a voluntary sense of duty by definition emanates from and is guided by an enlightened morality, which is itself developed and refined through a process of instruction. To qualify the first point, then: one can certainly act under a sense of duty, or with a sense of passion, towards reactionary, unenlightened causes. Here we should recall the conflict of wills outlined earlier. The fundamental distinction for Blanqui lies between the voluntary duty to act in the name of freely acquired and developed ideas and the duty to act in the name of corruption, deceit and oppression, the latter of which deriving as much from the conscious manipulators themselves as from the unconsciously manipulated. As Blanqui explains in one note, again calling upon the dualism underpinning his thought, the question of duty goes to the heart of what it means to be a free and conscious human being acting with integrity to oneself and to others:

Le dévouement absolu est une chose contre nature. Chez le meilleur des hommes il existe un coin personnel. On ne serait pas homme sans cela. Ainsi, dans les préoccupations politiques l'ambition a fatalement son rôle. Ce qu'on peut en exiger, c'est qu'elle soit toujours mise au service d'une idée. Elle n'acquiert qu'à ce prix une sorte de légitimité. Par malheur, les ambitieux

poursuivent surtout des vues égoïstes. Les idées, pour eux, sont un masque et un instrument.<sup>622</sup>

Absolute devotion to the ideas and morals developed and refined through a process of enlightened education is therefore the task of emancipatory politics, Blanqui believes, as he traces a successive association of enlightenment, conscious engagement and the struggle for equality and freedom.<sup>623</sup> Instruction, ideas, morality and volition also inform Blanqui's definition of humanity, for to be a truly committed actor is to fulfil one's most basic human capacity: to voluntarily will an enlightened idea.

### *Politics as faith*

Blanqui's politics is ultimately an at once simple yet profound choice of idealist conviction – idealist, that is, as Étienne Balibar recently suggested when reflecting on the nature of political commitment, 'both in the ordinary and in the technical sense of the term',<sup>624</sup> for Blanqui's conception of political practice presupposes an intellectually informed commitment to an enlightened ideal as much as a form of principled, passionate enthusiasm and faithfulness to a belief. Politics, for Blanqui, is as much a matter of logical reasoning as it is of passion and morality. Such is the meaning behind the invocation of the unity of head and heart: whether drawn from the bourgeoisie or the masses, a revolutionary conceives the ending of injustice and inequality as a conscious duty and task guided by humanist compassion (heart) on the one hand, and cerebral rationalism (head) on the other.<sup>625</sup> It is not a case of separating

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<sup>622</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 60 [21 September 1869].

<sup>623</sup> See Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *MA*, pp. 211-212.

<sup>624</sup> Balibar, 'Communism as Commitment, Imagination and Politics', p. 15.

<sup>625</sup> See Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, p. 67; Blanqui, 'À la Montagne de 93. Aux socialistes purs, ses véritables héritiers !', 28 November 1848, *MA*, pp. 150-151; Blanqui, 'Instructions pour une prise d'armes', *MA*, p. 262.

material (questions of suffering and well-being) from cerebral (questions of ignorance and enlightenment) concerns, but thinking the two together as a critique of the present and a guiding ideal for the future. A rationally conceived and passionately espoused rejection of injustice and commitment to freedom and equality is the basis of a voluntarist actor, triggering both the decision to begin and nourishing the resolve to continue. Blanqui makes explicit the link between ‘tête’, ‘cœur’ and ‘esprit’, emphasising the political importance of ‘tout ce qui est grand, noble et beau’ and ‘les grandes âmes’ – bearers of enlightened thought and virtuous devotion - as the resources of emancipatory movements.<sup>626</sup> If freedom is the ‘devise immortelle’, the ‘cri sacré’ for which all revolutionaries energetically act with fervent devotion to realise - as they can, as they must – it is because, Blanqui explains in January 1831, ‘[c]’est son retentissement seul qui a fait vibrer nos cœurs ; c’est elle seule qui a droit à notre amour, à notre culte’.<sup>627</sup> He thus later professed: ‘L’égalité est notre foi ; nous marchons avec ardeur et confiance sous sa bannière sainte, pleins de vénération et d’enthousiasme pour les immortels défenseurs de cette foi, animés du même dévouement qu’eux, prêts comme eux à verser tout notre sang pour son triomphe’.<sup>628</sup> After Buonarroti, who likewise described equality as his ‘religion’, his life its ‘témoignage’,<sup>629</sup> Blanqui often adopts a quasi-theological discourse of opposing faiths

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<sup>626</sup> Blanqui, ‘Malfaisance de l’Eglise’, *NDNM*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>627</sup> Blanqui, ‘Déclaration du Comité provisoire des Ecoles’, *MA*, p. 60.

<sup>628</sup> Blanqui goes on: ‘Nous sommes avec Jésus-Christ contre les juifs matérialistes et haineux ; avec Grégoire VII contre les tryans féodaux de l’Europe, avec Rousseau contre une noblesse et un clergé perdus de débauche, ignorants et oppresseurs, avec Robespierre contre une tourbe de marchands cupides, d’agioteurs sans foi ni loi, de trafiqueurs parricides, prêts à vendre comme Judas l’humanité pour trente deniers’ (Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 111). We discover here the link between those individuals striving for equality in the nineteenth century and past struggles under the same ideal, struggles Blanqui embodies in a series of individuals and leaders, which serves to reassert the primacy of enlightened, intellectual leadership. Overall, we could say that Blanqui understands his subjective, intellectual faith in equality and dedication to humanity as placing him and his allies as the latest subjects of a historical, eternal struggle. Blanqui’s subjective commitment is conceived as a form of historical commitment to continue the struggle for collective emancipation. For a largely complementary discussion of the relation between the subject, history and an idea, see Badiou, ‘The Idea of Communism’, pp. 3-4.

<sup>629</sup> ‘Deux lettres de Buonarroti’, 11 May 1835, *OI*, p. 307.

or, worst of all, of a struggle against those who avow no political faith whatsoever.<sup>630</sup>

Blanqui conceives politics in terms of faith, informed and guided by subjective passion, confidence and a courageous determination to prevail.<sup>631</sup>

A problem here confronts us. How can Blanqui simultaneously claim that ‘le régime d’égalité et de fraternité ... est notre seule religion’, ‘notre foi sociale’,<sup>632</sup> whilst maintaining that communism is ‘le dernier mot de la science sociale’?<sup>633</sup> Is there not a major tension between the insistence on emancipation as a work of faith, passion, spirit and heart and the conception of communism as an enlightenment project rooted in rational thought and knowledge? As he himself states in one note: ‘Contradiction complète en toutes choses entre la foi et la raison. Il faut que la société abandonne un de ces deux principes. Ils ne peuvent plus vivre ensemble.’<sup>634</sup> How does Blanqui reconcile his vehement anti-spiritualism with his own frequently avowed political faith and his materialism further still?

Possible explanations of this problem are not particularly forthcoming. One note on the meaning of materialism provides some insight. ‘Qu’est-ce que le matérialisme,’ asks Blanqui, ‘sinon la doctrine qui déclare l’univers infini dans le temps et dans l’espace, et l’esprit une propriété inespérable de la substance nerveuse, dans la vie comme dans la mort ?’<sup>635</sup> The human mind or spirit – the dual meaning of the term itself being one problem, for Blanqui seems to evoke ‘esprit’ in both senses – is an emanation of, and so in no way distinct from, the materiality of the human brain. While Blanqui insists that ‘la pensée, c’est toute notre personnalité. Le corps

<sup>630</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 110, p. 115; Blanqui, ‘Procès des poudres’, 2-11 August 1836, *OI*, p. 352.

<sup>631</sup> Bensaïd and Löwy also highlight this facet of Blanqui’s politics in ‘Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist’, p. 29.

<sup>632</sup> Blanqui, ‘Lettre à Maillard’, *MA*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>633</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 58 [15 March 1869].

<sup>634</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 193 [16 July 1869].

<sup>635</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 66 [n.d.].



appartient à la matière’, he nonetheless adds; thought is ‘emprisonnée dans le cerveau et impuissante à en sortir par sa propre force’.<sup>636</sup> To champion collective faith or spirit is not to abandon the primacy of objective matter, of the human brain, from which these cerebrally cultivated subjective conditions (morality, faith, duty, passion, and so forth) appear, as spiritualism claims in its distinction between spirit and matter. Indeed, Blanqui writes that while Catholicism is the ‘tombeau de l’intelligence, de la pensée, du cerveau’ Protestantism is, for its part, the ‘tombeau de la conscience, du sentiment, du cœur.’<sup>637</sup> Blanqui’s project, by contrast, seeks to develop and defend a form of enlightened, materialist morality. Political passion or faith must remain linked at all times to reason: ‘Pour ne pas glisser sur [une] pente fatale, le sentiment a besoin d’être appuyé/soutenu par une forte intelligence.’<sup>638</sup> The synonyms listed in his notebook are again revealing in this respect: ‘esprit, âme, cœur, caractère, conscience, volonté, génie, imagination, faculté, pensée, idée, sentiment’.<sup>639</sup> On this basis there would seem to be no contradiction between Blanqui’s materialism and his appeals to mind, spirit or faith: enlightened reason leads to enlightened morality, a conscious passion for justice and equality rooted the rational knowledge that all human beings are born free and equal and any curtailment of these natural rights constitutes injustice. Socialism, Blanqui accordingly explains, ‘n’est pas seulement la vérité scientifique, mais encore la plus haute morale.’<sup>640</sup>

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<sup>636</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 287 [n.d.]

<sup>637</sup> Blanqui, ‘Catholicisme et protestantisme’, n.d., *NDNM*, p. 76.

<sup>638</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 153 [6 March 1869]. In one note Blanqui suggests, like many of his contemporaries, that women’s greater propensity for sentimentalism makes them much more susceptible to being instruments of reaction and oppression, particularly religious domination. He concludes: ‘L’homme, sec, dur, brutal, mais guidé par la raison et dominé par l’idée de justice, est en fin de compte, beaucoup plus humain que la femme avec sa sensibilité et ses extases’ (Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 243 [n.d.]).

<sup>639</sup> Blanqui MSS 9591(1), fo. 89 [n.d.].

<sup>640</sup> Blanqui, ‘Projet de discours’, *CSII*, p. 140. See also insistence that one could not ‘[e]xagérer l’idéal au-delà des forces humaines’, as did religion (Blanqui, ‘Candide’, *MA*, p. 247).

Blanqui's form of political faith can be seen to derive from his idealism and his voluntarism. To say that communism is the most logical, rational organisation of society does not in itself offer the means for its establishment. As Blanqui recognises regarding religion: 'La science et l'histoire ont rendu leur sentence. Il ne reste qu'à l'exécuter.'<sup>641</sup> Religion and the social injustice it creates may be irrational, it may be anachronistic, but that does not mean that human action is no less necessary in order to end it. Equality or communism, Blanqui stresses, need humans collectively carrying the idea to realise it. To do so requires belief – belief that equality is right, belief that it is just, belief that it is true. Only this can sustain commitment to the idea of equality in the face of successive defeats, in the knowledge that historical processes will not provide the solution sooner or later, in the assumption that we can rely on nothing but ourselves as the bearers of our own destiny. 'À travers les persécutions, les violences, nous marcherons fermes, inébranlables, à notre but', Blanqui defiantly declared in 1831; 'nous sommes jeunes, nous sommes patients ; nous ne désespérons pas aisément de la liberté.'<sup>642</sup> Defeat is not definitive. Defeat is the summons to begin again, to ensure victory next time.

Castro and Guevara are noteworthy for sharing Blanqui's privileging of faith and spirit alongside a sense of duty, confidence, energy and enthusiasm in the cause of victory. As Castro recognised when reflecting on Guevara's death: 'Without this type of revolutionary and human being, ready to do what they did; without the spirit to confront the enormous obstacles they faced; without the readiness to die that accompanied them at every moment; without their deeply held conviction in the justice of their cause and their unyielding faith in the invincible force of the peoples, against a power like Yankee imperialism ... without these, the liberation of the

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<sup>641</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 159 [n.d.].

<sup>642</sup> Blanqui, 'Déclaration du Comité provisoire des Ecoles', *MA*, p. 60.

peoples of this continent will not be attained.<sup>643</sup> And just like Guevara, the extent to which Blanqui himself lived up to his prescriptions of revolutionary duty and commitment is compelling. For followers and admirers, critics and detractors alike, Blanqui is emblematic of what it means to dedicate a life to a conviction and a principle. In spite of defeats and divisions, imprisonment and illness, when all seemed lost Blanqui's determined militancy, his political faith and passion remained no less resolute.

### *Voluntary servitude*

Underlying Blanqui's voluntarism and indeed of major importance to his entire project is the conviction that to voluntarily surrender one's capacity to will is to become an agent of oppression and domination. Of course, for Blanqui one has to be conscious of one's servitude before one is capable of voluntarily working to overthrow it. It nonetheless still follows that since Blanqui defines humans in terms of their capacity for voluntary self-determination, to passively obey is to surrender one's most basic natural ability: to freely will. Just as humanity's natural freedom ceases when its will can be externally constrained, Rousseau states, the renouncement of the fundamental freedom to will 'is incompatible with the nature of man; to remove the will's freedom is to remove all morality from our actions.'<sup>644</sup> This conjunction of free volition as the natural essence of humanity and moral duty as decisive in the triumph

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<sup>643</sup> Fidel Castro, 'Death of Che Guevara', in *Cuban Revolution Reader*, ed. Julio García Luis (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2008), p. 203.

<sup>644</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 50. See also Étienne La Boétie's well-known reflection on voluntary servitude, in which he advances first tradition and history, second cowardice, obedience and compliance, and finally devotion and allegiance as explanations for why a free people consent to their own oppression. Like a fire, runs La Boétie's simile, tyranny derives its power from its fuel. The people provide this fuel; they alone empower. And just as ceasing to furnish fuel extinguishes the fire, without the consent and obedience of the people tyranny collapses. La Boétie is of course aware that a people may initially be coerced and vanquished by force. However, 'ceux qui viennent après servent sans regret et font volontiers ce que leurs devanciers avaient fait par contrainte' (Étienne De La Boétie, *Discours de la servitude volontaire* [Paris: Librio, 2013], pp. 13, 19).

of freedom or tyranny is fundamental for Rousseau and Blanqui alike. Since for the latter the brain alone ‘fait l’homme, sa dignité, sa grandeur’ and is the origin of the enlightened thought from which political volition derives,<sup>645</sup> tyranny accordingly requires ‘l’abjection, la soumission rampante, l’abdication de toute dignité, l’abrutissement volontaire.’<sup>646</sup> Recall Blanqui’s assumption that oppression and servitude are not natural, preordained or inevitable but the result of the consciously formulated and actively imposed will of the exploiter. Any form of resignation, of merely accepting an externally or historically prescribed or imposed fate must therefore be dismissed as a matter of course - the political stakes are simply too high. ‘Quand une nation, affligée d’un mauvais gouvernement, n’a plus la volonté ou la force de le changer, elle tombe en agonie et glisse peu à peu dans le sépulcre.’<sup>647</sup> Insofar as the government, the decisive site of power, must be overthrown by the will of the people, failure to do so will only perpetuate tyranny and oppression. The people must hold, as Blanqui speculated was indeed true in April 1848, ‘[une] défiance ... profonde envers cette doctrine de l’obéissance passive qui a noyé si souvent Paris dans le sang français.’<sup>648</sup>

Blanqui does not stop there, however. In the face of systematic oppression and ubiquitous injustice, his response is to extend and radicalise the role of duty within his voluntarism in line with his notion of political morality noted above. To passively obey injustice is to renounce not only the natural ability but also moral duty to actively will the cause of justice. In Blanqui’s eyes ‘the passive victim of a violation of natural rights was as guilty as his oppressor, for the acceptance of injustice was its sanction’, Spitzer notes. ‘Therefore everyone was morally bound to the struggle

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<sup>645</sup> Blanqui, ‘Athéisme et spiritualisme’, *NDNM*, p. 23.

<sup>646</sup> Blanqui, ‘Malfaisance de l’Eglise’, *NDNM*, p. 62.

<sup>647</sup> Blanqui, ‘Projet de discours’, *CSII*, p. 158.

<sup>648</sup> Blanqui, ‘Adresse au gouvernement provisoire’, *MA*, p. 140.

against injustice, no matter what the cost'.<sup>649</sup> From his very first public text, a passionate call to arms written in the heat of the *Trois Glorieuses*, Blanqui sets out the basis of this fundamental choice between passive compliance and the principled defiance through which emancipation can be created. 'Consentirons-nous à devenir un troupeau d'esclaves sous le fouet des jésuites?', he asks his fellow citizens. 'Non, non ! Plutôt mourir !'<sup>650</sup> The belief in taking an informed, principled stand makes no room for ambivalence, indecision or purported impartiality: either you reject the injustices and oppression of the status quo and work with all your energy to overthrow this order and create an egalitarian alternative based on freedom and justice, or you consent to and are complicit with injustice and oppression. Spiritualism, for example, derives its 'force' precisely from the 'impunité' conferred upon it; impunity is precisely how it remains 'inviolable, tout arrogant de l'humilité de ses victimes', Blanqui notes, before adding: 'Malheur à qui subit l'invective sans la rendre !'<sup>651</sup> In the case of intellectuals who have betrayed the cause of the people and equality, since devotion to the plight of the poor and weak is the *sine qua non* of enlightened thought, and since enlightened thought is the decisive factor upon which the path to equality would be won or lost, to relinquish this intellectual duty to the oppressed is, by logical extension, to be complicit with continued oppression and exploitation. We can also now appreciate how the accusation of apostasy is the other side to Blanqui's insistence on politics as faith.<sup>652</sup> Those 'apostates' who commit the 'crime' of abandoning intelligence, who 'blaspheme' or attempt to suppress enlightened thought, Blanqui scornfully writes, provide 'un signe qu'ils ne marchent plus dans les voies de

<sup>649</sup> Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>650</sup> Blanqui, 'Première proclamation', *MA*, p. 54.

<sup>651</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 76 [8 September 1869]; cf. Blanqui MSS 9587, fo. 378 [n.d.].

<sup>652</sup> For other examples of the accusation of apostasy, see Blanqui, 'À propos des clameurs contre l'*Avis du peuple*', *MA*, p. 169; Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 467 [June 1850]; Blanqui, 'Procès des poudres', 2-11 August 1836, *OI*, p. 353; Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 112.

l'humanité !'<sup>653</sup> Overall we might say, then, that for Blanqui all power that commits injustice is illegitimate; all illegitimate power is empowered through voluntary obedience; all those who empower illegitimacy consent to injustice; all justice is produced through the defiance and overpowering of illegitimate power.

### **Volition and transition**

Blanqui first outlined the notion of a post-revolutionary transitional power in 1837.<sup>654</sup> Such reflections no doubt arose from a set of fundamental questions that confront all serious revolutionary thinkers: What would happen the day after power had been seized from the ruling government? What was the relationship between political and social transformation? Who or what would be capable of continuing the revolution, of pushing and guiding it forward? These are questions we will now consider. The question of transitional power also brings us to what seems to me the major problem and limitation of Blanqui's voluntarism: the over-privileging of an enlightened consciousness as a precondition of volition.

#### *A patient realism*

Surprisingly for a figure often dismissed as an impatient adventurer, when it comes to reflecting on the temporality of constructing a new post-revolutionary social order and the question of social transformation more generally Blanqui's voice is one of

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<sup>653</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, pp. 112-113, 114-115. We might also note that such forthright critiques of those who compromise the integrity of intellectual *engagement* also emanate from the belief in confidence, faith and enthusiasm as forces of political mobilisation. Intellectual devotion and dedication to equality forge confidence, trust, faith and hope amongst the people; they are, Blanqui reasons, the essential precondition for the people's necessary obedience to their intellectual leadership. Accordingly, when intellectuals betray equality and the people, they too sow the seeds of doubt and resignation. All trust in intelligence dissolves, equality perishes, privilege prevails. For Blanqui, intellectual betrayal, in short, fatally undermines the entire revolutionary project.

<sup>654</sup> Le Nuz, 'Introduction', in *OI*, pp. 369-370. See 'Formulaire de réception à la Société des Saisons', *OI*, p. 383.

patience, not to say of pragmatism. After the revolution successfully seized and could exercise political power, priorities would have to be made and struggles carefully chosen. ‘Trop d’obstacles exigeront des années de tranchée ouverte, pour s’amuser à l’attaque en règle d’une haie qui peut se franchir à la course’, Blanqui explains. ‘L’armée, la magistrature, le christianisme, l’organisation politique, simples haies. L’ignorance, bastion formidable. Un jour pour la haie ; pour le bastion, vingt ans.’<sup>655</sup>

To evoke terms unfamiliar to Blanqui, we might say that therein lies the relation between base and superstructure – although, as already noted, manifestly Blanqui maintains with Hegel, not Marx, the primacy of ideas and consciousness as determining material reality and the social existence of man. Ignorance is the base on which all the material exploitation, inequality and injustice of the established order is established; ignorance is the cause of the deception, deceit, hypocrisy and manipulation responsible for domination and oppression. Conversely, as the *Critique Sociale* repeatedly insists, universal enlightenment is the base of equality, freedom and justice – of communism. Blanqui’s communism, we have seen, posits the end of domination and inequality on an informed, conscious population; the advent of communism will occur when, thanks to universal instruction, ‘pas un seul homme ne pourra être la dupe d’un autre’ and ‘[l]e jugement deviendra l’apanage commun’.<sup>656</sup>

To think that radical social transformation can be achieved immediately without the protracted work of destroying ignorance through public enlightenment – the prerequisite act for successfully establishing community – is therefore ‘le rêve de bien des impatiences’; any talk of social transformation ‘avant la transformation des esprits’ was nothing more than a ‘rêve irréalisable’. Without ending ignorance, without public enlightenment and the free consciousness it creates, ‘[l]a volonté

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<sup>655</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 183.

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186.

même de la France entière resterait impuissante à devancer l'heure, et la tentative n'aboutirait qu'à un échec'.<sup>657</sup> Popular ignorance or the non-dissemination of ideas more generally are, it seems, the one obstacle - unlike those presented by the superstructure in the form of the state, socio-political institutions and economic relations - that cannot be overcome by force of will alone. Perhaps initially surprising, such an affirmation is in fact consistent with the primacy Blanqui accords to consciousness in his conception of conscious volition: at all times and in all circumstances, ideas and thought remain the basis of decisive action. This is precisely why, as already made clear, '[l]a communauté ne peut s'improviser, parce qu'elle sera une conséquence de l'instruction qui ne s'improvise pas davantage.'<sup>658</sup> The process of public enlightenment, so it would seem, is the limit of collective political volition.<sup>659</sup>

When it comes to the social transformation of the base (to use the terms just evoked), of society's ruling ideas and consciousness, Blanqui has no illusions over the difficulty of such a task. He is brutally frank about the time and work needed to reach an emancipated society and the distance between now and then. 'Communisme n'est compatible qu'avec l'universalité des lumières et nous n'en sommes pas là.'<sup>660</sup> To quote phrases in which, without this wider contextualisation and the essential qualifications it holds, communism appears as the order-in-waiting, brought to light through the force of events alone, is therefore somewhat misleading.<sup>661</sup> Political revolution can occur immediately, social revolution certainly cannot. One need look

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<sup>657</sup> Ibid., pp. 183-184.

<sup>658</sup> Ibid., p. 184. See also Blanqui, 'Le communisme primitif', April 1869, *CSII*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>659</sup> See in particular Blanqui, 'Les sectes et la révolution', *CSII*, p. 115.

<sup>660</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, p. 213.

<sup>661</sup> See in particular the statement: 'À juger par la disposition présente des esprits, le communisme ne frapperait pas précisément aux portes. Mais rien de si trompeur que la situation, parce que rien n'est si mobile' (Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, p. 211), which serves as the epigraph for *Quelques agents du Parti imaginaire*, 'Préface: A un ami', *MA*, p. 9. Indeed, although Blanqui likewise earlier writes that communism 'est la révolution même' it is not without going on to add: 'Il lui est impossible de s'imposer brusquement, pas plus le lendemain que la veille d'une victoire' (Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, p. 201).



no further than the *Critique Sociale* to find a clearer affirmation of the point: 'le lendemain d'une révolution, coup de théâtre. Non pas qu'il s'opère une transformation subite. Hommes et choses sont les mêmes que la veille. Seulement l'espoir et la crainte ont changé de camp. Les chaînes [*sic*] sont tombées, la nation est libre, et une horizon immense s'ouvre devant elle.'<sup>662</sup> The horizon of communism appears for the first time in the wake of revolution, not communism itself. Let us not forget what is at stake here. Like Rousseau, like Marx,<sup>663</sup> Blanqui's social revolution seeks to fundamentally change humanity from its current state in order to fully realise its humanity as a conscious individual collectively exercising its will. The task of the revolution is to change human nature. Blanqui's project will work towards 'la *destruction* des habitudes morales' so as to built them anew;<sup>664</sup> only through destroying 'les préjugés, les habitudes de servilité soigneusement entretenues dans le peuple' could human nature be remade.<sup>665</sup> Such fundamental changes were nothing new, of course. 'Le genre humain a déjà changé tant de fois de mœurs, de caractère, d'habitudes, de lois, de religions, de morale,' Blanqui makes clear, 'qu'on ne sait vraiment où serait bien sa limite dans cette voie des transfigurations.'<sup>666</sup> But without fully transforming the habits, the morals, the basic nature of humanity, any attempt to create a new and enduring social order will fail, and the old order will return.<sup>667</sup> The horizon opened up by revolution thus presents less an immediate or an assured

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<sup>662</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, p. 203. See also Blanqui, 'Les sectes et la révolution', *CSII*, p. 115-116.

<sup>663</sup> 'The man who dares to undertake the establishment of a people has to feel himself capable of changing, so to speak, the nature of men' (Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 76). Marx approvingly quotes this passage in *On the Jewish Question*, before adding: 'All emancipation is bringing back man's world and his relationship to man himself.' The task, Marx claims, is for man to 'become a species-being; man must recognize his own forces as social forces, organize them, and thus no longer separate social forces from himself in the form of political forces. Only when this has been achieved will human emancipation be completed' (Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 64).

<sup>664</sup> Blanqui, 'Dunoyer', July 1870, *CSI*, p. 252; emphasis in original.

<sup>665</sup> Blanqui and Hadot-Desages, 'Propagande Démocratique', 1835, *OI*, p. 314.

<sup>666</sup> Blanqui, 'Les apologies de l'usure', n.d., *CSI*, p. 145.

<sup>667</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, p. 184.

eventual triumph than a further injunction: to begin the work of real social transformation.

*An elitist and substitutionist conception of will?*

Where is this consideration of temporarility and conscious volition taking us? First, we should note that Blanqui is entirely correct to insist that political revolution, the overthrow of the old order and the seizure of power, in reality constitutes the beginning of a longer, more profound period of transition and transformation. Blanqui reminds us of the inadequacy of the view that emancipatory politics can be reduced to the moment of rupture - a suggestion that not only conveniently overlooks the practical problem posed by the forces who will inevitably resist any such movements, as noted earlier. It also evades the question of how an oppressed people can become capable of genuine ‘*self-government*’, to use Blanqui’s term.<sup>668</sup> With regards the latter point such an evasion is in fact often quite explicit, predicated on the belief that the people is already capable of self-rule. Blanqui, however, like a whole series of thinkers from Rousseau, Jefferson and Lenin to Hardt and Žižek more recently, insists that the practice of democracy demands a change in human nature. As Hardt affirms with Lenin and Spinoza (and the same presuppositions apply to Blanqui): ‘if the population is ignorant and superstitious then establishing democracy would merely mean instituting the rule of ignorance and superstition. The multitude will not be spontaneously or immediately transformed by the revolutionary event. It is the role of the transition to accomplish this task: to make a multitude capable of democracy, with the skills, talents, and knowledges necessary to rule themselves.’<sup>669</sup> Any attempt to

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<sup>668</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 107 [14 October 1867]; Blanqui, ‘Projet de discours’, *CSII*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>669</sup> Hardt, ‘Introduction: Thomas Jefferson, or, The Transition of Democracy’, in Thomas Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence* (London: Verso, 2007), p. xvi. The point of departure here is Lenin’s

resolve this problem therefore rests on how one conceives the relation between the mechanisms of transition and the transformation of the people. What is Blanqui's proposed solution, and how does it compare to that of these other political theorists?

Before examining Blanqui let us first consider Hardt's reflections on this subject a little further, for he highlights some of the fundamental tensions and advances some solutions – and in my opinion convincing ones – to the problem of revolutionary transition. Hardt begins by outlining the concept of transition as fundamental both in thinking revolution as necessarily a process - the revolutionary event marks the beginning of the revolution, not its end - and yet as one of the major impasses of revolutionary praxis. 'The (often authoritarian) means employed during revolutionary transitions frequently conflict with and even contradict the desired (democratic) ends; moreover, these transitions never seem to come to an end.'<sup>670</sup>

Theory and historical practice alike attest to the need to re-engage with this at once contentious and vital concept. Hardt traces Lenin's concept of transition as the most insightful and significant contribution to this discussion. Against the social democrats, who believe the rule of the people is impossible and so seek to maintain the state as a mediating force in the necessary division between rulers and ruled, and against the anarchists, who think that the rule of the people is possible now and only requires the abolition of the state for humanity's otherwise repressed natural capacity for self-rule to be realised, Lenin, explains Hardt, posits that the state is antithetical to democracy and as such must be abolished, yet democracy cannot simply be established through the state's immediate abolition. A process of transition is therefore necessary during which a dictatorship of the proletariat completes the work of popular education, eventually arriving at democracy and allowing the withering away of the state

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assertion that 'human nature as it is now ... human nature that cannot do without subordination, control, and "managers"' is, Hardt adds, 'trained to be subservient and passive' (ibid., p. x, xvi).

<sup>670</sup> Ibid, p. viii.

altogether. Lenin's reasoning derives in part from the practical need to wield the power of the state in the defense and consolidation of the revolution against the counter-revolution, but above all it concerns human nature and its capacity for self-rule. The central strength of Lenin's thought, Hardt suggests, is to recognise that a transitional period must be undertaken in order for the people to learn how to rule themselves; human nature must be transformed through education and training so that the people become capable of self-rule.<sup>671</sup>

The major weakness with Lenin's schema, however, according to Hardt, 'lies in the radical division it requires between means and ends, between the form of transitional rule and the revolutionary goals.'<sup>672</sup> Enter Thomas Jefferson. Hardt discovers in Jefferson's concept of participatory democracy a corrective to the attempts of Lenin, as well as of Žižek and Laclau more recently, to present the source of popular transformation as a figure standing outside or above the people in a transcendent position of hegemony or authority rather than from coming within the people themselves. An externally-imposed transformation becomes a self-transformation. Though Jefferson agrees with Lenin that a new human nature must be created through popular education, training and the establishment of democratic habits, and that this new humanity is 'the *outcome* of the revolutionary process' rather than its prerequisite, Jefferson's decisive move is to not divorce the means and ends of the transformative process itself but, rather, to present them as one and the same. In Jefferson, writes Hardt, 'the means and ends of the transition are never separated entirely: democracy is the goal of revolutionary process and, paradoxically, democracy is also the means of achieving it.'<sup>673</sup> Therein lies the crux of Hardt's argument. 'A transition ruled by a hegemonic figure does not teach people anything

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<sup>671</sup> Ibid., pp. ix-xi.

<sup>672</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>673</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

about self-rule', Hardt writes, 'it only reinforces their habits of subservience and passivity. People only learn democracy by doing it. The necessary transformation – learning to rule ourselves without a master – can only take place through practice, in action.' For Hardt, transition, in this Jeffersonian sense, particularly when supplemented by Jefferson's simultaneous insistence on periodic popular rebellion against the government, 'is recast as a process of infinite becoming'.<sup>674</sup>

Turning now to Blanqui, three notes from the late 1860s and 1870 reveal the premise and reasoning as well as the solutions and outcomes of his own concept of revolutionary transition. Writing in 1870 Blanqui sets out, with austere directness, the fundamental elements of his approach:

L'instruction, indispensable et rare. Impuissance du peuple à se gouverner. Ce ne serait qu'une apparence. Le suffrage universel, funeste en 48. Plus funeste serait le gouv. [*sic*] du peuple par le peuple. Proie des intrigants, des bavards, des charlatans, des tartuffes. Quoi qu'il décide, toujours, simple écho, serinette, porte-voix de quelqu'un. Le gouv. [*sic*] mal nécessaire jusqu'à l'instruction complète. Le gouv. [*sic*] du peuple, mensonge et illusion aujourd'hui – aussi impossible qu'un voyage à la Lune – on pourra le prendre par flagornerie. Il le paiera cher. Dictature Parisienne, comme représentation nationale, seul gouvernt. [*sic*] raisonnable et possible. Développement rapide de l'instruction, unique instrument de salut.<sup>675</sup>

The people's insufficient level of enlightenment presently excludes the possibility of genuine democracy, Blanqui believes. Without the transformative effects of education

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<sup>674</sup> Ibid., pp. xx, xxii.

<sup>675</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 107 [28 April 1870].

and the consciousness it engenders, far from self-rule based on collective interests the rule of the people would merely reflect the structures and interests of the established order - that is, oligarchic rule based on private interests. The sole practical means to bridge the gap between what is and what ought to be is thus the negation of direct self-rule: dictatorship. The necessity of Paris's temporary primacy is explained in a second note:

Paris, représentation nationale, fait la puissance de la France, en condensant sur un point toutes les forces intellectuelles. Ce moyen peut être bon pour constituer un pays et lui donner à la fois énergie extérieure et interne. Mais ce n'est pas là un état normal. Un peuple doit vivre par lui-même et non par représentations. Paris est la France entière aujourd'hui. Il faut que la France entière devienne Paris, et Paris aura cessé d'être une nécessité vitale (pour la nation). Sa nation est à l'état de tutelle et de minorité sous l'autorité naturelle d'un parent supérieur en intelligence. L'Enfant ne peut rester indéfiniment mineur. Il doit arriver à sa majorité.<sup>676</sup>

In Blanqui's project the primacy of Paris is symptomatic of the primacy of the idea. The bastion of ignorance, as Blanqui calls it, propping up tyranny and preventing democracy can only be overthrown through exercising and extending the concentrated intellectual authority of Paris over France. Paris is both representative and creator of the people; Paris instructs the people, developing its thought, intellect and thereby its capacities for self-government to the extent that the work of the central authority renders itself obsolete through its completion of this task. This brings us to a third

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<sup>676</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 173 [n.d.]. See also Blanqui MSS 9581, fo. 93 [7 February 1856].

note, which expands on the consequences and goals of transition. Suggesting that in 1793 Paris replaced ‘l’autocratie d’un seul’ with, so Blanqui writes in a somewhat curious phrase, ‘l’autocratie de tous’, that is, equality, in the 1860s Paris remained and would remain the representative of equality until France as a whole had adopted the principle - and until that day arrives any curtailment of the centralised power of this beacon of enlightenment and revolutionary force is a counter-revolutionary measure. Maintaining that the details of this future egalitarian social arrangement were of no interest or concern for revolutionaries, its essential contours could still be traced:

Il n’y aura plus alors ni Royauté, ni patriciat, ni clergé, ni bourgeoisie, ni plèbe, ni dictature Parisienne, ni Centralisation, ni Fédéralisme, ni différences (diversité, multiplicité) de classes. Ces mots n’appartiendront plus qu’à l’histoire. La nation, une, libre, maîtresse d’elle-même, sans millionnaires et sans mendiants, sans exploiters ni exploités, surtout sans oisifs, possédera la véritable *self-government* qui, jusqu’à cette heure n’existe nulle part, pas même aux Etats-Unis, tant s’en faut, et en Angleterre, moins que partout ailleurs.<sup>677</sup>

The third part of this schema is, then, the end of all forms of authority, of the emergence of the rule of the people in a unified, truly free and egalitarian society. Enlightenment through dictatorship to democracy – these are the three components of Blanqui’s concept of transition.

We can now see how Blanqui’s reframing of the temporality of revolution anticipates the two central pillars of Lenin’s theory: maintaining state power as the

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<sup>677</sup> Blanqui MSS, 9590(1), fo. 106 [14 October 1867]. See also the earlier assertion that equality will end ‘la distinction des privilégiés et des prolétaires, voilà le plus grand service qu’elle rendra à l’humanité’ (Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 110).

practical means through which to simultaneously enact transition and defend the revolution from its enemies, as noted earlier, and the necessity of remaking and transforming the population's human nature, of developing its thought and knowledge so as to make it capable of self-rule. Blanqui is useful, if not rather prescient, in conceiving, like Lenin after him, 'the revolutionary event as both rupture and duration, an historical break that opens a new historical process.'<sup>678</sup> Blanqui's attempts to respond to the dilemma of how to achieve democracy also display an admirable level of political realism in assessing an actual state of affairs and advancing resolutely practical solutions. He provides, in this respect, 'a concrete analysis of a concrete situation', to employ Lenin's own oft-quoted maxim. Nonetheless, Blanqui's conception of transition comes up against the same hurdles Hardt identifies in Lenin. And, again just like the Bolshevik leader, Blanqui offers no obvious means of overcoming them. Instead of training the people in democracy through the practice of democracy itself, Blanqui's thinking is properly dialectical: the transition to democracy demands the negation of democracy. In this sense Blanqui does not go beyond Lenin, or perhaps this should be Lenin's failure to go beyond Blanqui. Predating the dictatorship of the proletariat, in Blanqui's account it is the dictatorship of Paris that stands above the people and forms the transcendent revolutionary authority directing the education of the population, the font from which enlightenment will flow. The exercise of the general will, the democratic and communist social arrangement Blanqui proposes under the name of 'community' or 'association', is deferred until the process of enlightenment is complete. Blanqui is in fact quite explicit about the division between the means of popular education and its goals of universal enlightenment and, as a result, communism. Having noted in the

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<sup>678</sup> Hardt, 'Introduction: Thomas Jefferson, or, The Transition of Democracy', pp. x-xi.



*Critique Sociale*, for example, some of ‘les conséquences de l’universalité des lumières’, Blanqui flags up to readers that ‘le communisme figurera comme simple effet, non comme cause. Il naîtra fatalement de l’instruction généralisée et ne peut naître que de là.’<sup>679</sup> The strict incompatibility of causes and effects, of means and ends, necessarily gives way to delay and deferral. Communism cannot be imposed ‘brusquement’<sup>680</sup> because, as we have seen, enlightenment is ‘la condition *sine qua non* du communisme’.<sup>681</sup> Only when universal instruction is finally complete can its fruits be enjoyed, as Blanqui summarises in one note: ‘La lumière manque ; il faut la faire. C’est de devoir et la tâche de la Révolution. L’instruction du procès terminée, la nation prononcera.’<sup>682</sup> Communism thus conceived excludes by definition any form of self-transformation, a communism or democracy produced through its own practice, since education as the sole means of achieving communism and democracy is posited on a fixed hierarchy of intelligence and knowledge, on an irreducible master-student relation.<sup>683</sup> To act otherwise is, in Blanqui’s eyes, to short-circuit the necessary process of the proper dissemination of thought and ideas. The assertion that ‘les communistes n’ont cessé de former l’avant-garde la plus audacieuse de la démocratie’<sup>684</sup> could therefore be read not only as Blanqui’s dismissal of the revolutionary credentials of contemporary political movements or tendencies – Saint-Simonians, Fourierists, Positivists – but also as a more literal assertion of the need for

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<sup>679</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 187.

<sup>680</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>681</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 59 [15 March 1869].

<sup>682</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 160 [n.d.].

<sup>683</sup> Blanqui is as such completely at odds with Hardt’s assertion that for Jefferson ‘when people participate actively in government, deciding on all the matters that concern them, either directly or by instructing their delegates up to the highest levels of government, they are transformed. There is no great instructor that teaches [the people] the necessary lessons. The process of transition is a self-training in the capacities of self-rule. Through practice they develop the skills, knowledges, and habits necessary for self-government and, in the process, a new humanity is created’ (Hardt, ‘Introduction: Thomas Jefferson, or, The Transition of Democracy’, p. xx).

<sup>684</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 199.

democracy to be carried by an elite capable of conferring it upon the people when they are intellectually capable of its proper exercise.

The problem of transition reveals one of the major structural problems of Blanqui's political project as a whole. The price Blanqui pays for his insistence on *conscious* volition is extremely high: it is at odds with a conception of popular political will in which conscious *volition* is by definition an 'inclusive' process involving 'direct participation'<sup>685</sup> and therefore opens the door to the accusation of vanguardist elitism. The overriding logic in Blanqui's writings is one in which, lacking the adequate level of consciousness produced through enlightened instruction, not all the people are presently capable of freely willing, or at least that this capacity is stifled or repressed – whether internally or externally – to the extent that it cannot be properly exercised as it can and must.<sup>686</sup> Only an external, hegemonic force can correct this. As a result of the strictly dialectical process by which he conceives transition and change, does Blanqui not over-emphasise this pedagogical prerequisite, the conscious thought demanded for decisive voluntary action, thereby delaying – unnecessarily no doubt - the exercise of a truly democratic, participatory political will? In short, does Blanqui's conception of '*pensée-volonté*' not display a certain lack of confidence in the people?

Consider the following striking passage on cooperatives, which can, I think, be regarded as generally illustrative of Blanqui's thought on this issue. In Blanqui's view the primary shortcoming of these forms of worker associations is, again, the wider level of ignorance amongst the population. As a result of not merely

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<sup>685</sup> See Hallward, 'The Will of the People', p. 21.

<sup>686</sup> Perhaps the most notable exception to this position is found in the affirmation of the 'Formulaire de reception de la Société des Familles' that 'tout citoyen qui réunit discrétion et bonne volonté mérite d'entrer dans nos rangs, quel que soit d'ailleurs son degré d'instruction. La société achève son éducation politique ('Formulaire de réception de la Société des Familles', *OI*, p. 298.) I would argue, however, that this statement is not representative of Blanqui's overall position more consistently put forward.

insufficient education but of miseducation at the hands of the clergy, '[l]a plupart des prolétaires n'ont pas les connaissances suffisantes pour juger par eux-mêmes la gestion d'une société'.<sup>687</sup> Credit societies, meanwhile, 'exigent une instruction qui en rétrécit singulièrement le cercle'. Likewise, since only a small minority of workers possess the intellectual '*capacité nécessaire*' to undertake the self-management of production, pursuing this goal in unenlightened society risks divorcing them from the ignorant and impoverished majority and becoming an enriched '*demi-bourgeoisie*', henceforth simply pursuing private interests rather than collective emancipation; it would cream off from the mass of the people its '*protecteurs naturels*'.<sup>688</sup> Without the necessary critical faculties required of egalitarian socio-economic practices – to repeat, without the '*capacité nécessaire*' – any form of direct, popular political participation must be delayed. Blanqui is explicit about this. Only after a programme of mass public education, based on reason and science instead of the clerical superstition and in a process that would last less than ten years, so Blanqui speculates, would the intellectual transformation of France be complete. Then and only then could the general will reign. So while Blanqui describes how thanks to this process '[t]ous les travailleurs, devenus, d'instruments passifs, des citoyens éclairés, associeraient spontanément leurs intelligences et leurs bras, et le problème de l'organisation du travail selon la justice se trouverait résolu', even this depiction of an enlightened citizenry actively and collectively participating in the ruling of society is then immediately qualified as a distant reality, a move on Blanqui's part that reinforces the current state of passive ignorance for which, regrettably, no instant remedies could be applied: 'Par malheur, nous n'en sommes pas là'.<sup>689</sup>

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<sup>687</sup> Blanqui, 'Projet de discours', *CSII*, p. 154.

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155-156.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

The same passage also reaffirms the conviction noted above that the work of establishing democracy is restricted to an elite capable of conferring it upon the people. The emancipation of the people could not take place through '*petites sociétés coopératives* ... . Le peuple ne peut sortir de servage que par l'impulsion de la *grande société*, de l'État', Blanqui writes. 'Car l'État n'a pas d'autre mission légitime.' A centralised authority is the driving force of popular emancipation; the post-revolutionary state alone possesses the knowledge and power to liberate and thus to create the people, to the extent that the activity of the people cannot take place 'en dehors de son gouvernement'.<sup>690</sup> Only the government could simultaneously direct popular education and activity while protecting the people against 'les races des vampires' whose inevitable reappearance before this process is complete will threaten to re-enslave the ignorant masses through manipulation and deception, causing the people to fight on the side of their oppressors and against their own interests just as before the revolution, and in so doing derailing the entire revolutionary process with disastrous consequences.<sup>691</sup> To return to a point evoked in the previous chapter, Blanqui and Laclau are in this respect quite close in prioritising forms of representation over direct popular empowerment (Blanqui for the non-elite sections of the people in the provinces, Laclau for the people as a whole), and are accordingly both limited in their own ways. As Hallward affirms, the people must be collectively and actively willed and empowered in order for it to then be collectively and actively named or represented, and not vice versa.<sup>692</sup>

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<sup>690</sup> Ibid., p. 157. Blanqui uses as the basis to critique the discipline of political economy: 'Quelle est donc cette thèse nouvelle, soulevée en dépit de l'expérience et du sens commun par une prétendue science qui s'intitule économie politique; thèse étrange, qui place toute l'activité d'un peuple en dehors de son gouvernement et l'en déclare radicalement indépendante? Une pareille doctrine est le plus audacieux démenti à l'histoire, par conséquent une sottise. Pis que cela, elle est une immoralité et un crime' (ibid., pp. 157-158).

<sup>691</sup> See for example Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, p. 184.

<sup>692</sup> 'The will of the people is a matter of material power and active empowerment, before it is a matter of representation, authority or legitimacy' (Hallward, 'The Will of the People', p. 22). Cf. Laclau: 'the

Indeed, for Hallward the belief in the necessity of patience is characteristic of those ‘who lack confidence in the people’, a view which ‘takes the general form of an insistence on socially mediated time, the time of ongoing “development”. ... It is always too early, from this perspective, for equality and participation’, Hallward writes. ‘Only when they “grow up” or “progress” might today’s people become worthy of the rights that a prudent society withholds.’ Unlike others who may espouse this view, however, Blanqui can in no way be accused of substituting ‘confidence in the people’ for ‘confidence in historical progress’.<sup>693</sup> With Blanqui the necessity of socio-political patience is not symptomatic of the patience of historical necessity. Nonetheless, such a stringent conception of conscious volition forces us to confront the fact that so long as an actor is not intellectually conscious they remain incapable of the conscious volition Blanqui advances as the definitive practice of a free, egalitarian society ruled by collective interests. The result is in many ways an undeniably elitist and/or substitutionist conception of transition and change: only those with the necessary knowledge can act to create a society in which all are informed and so all are actors. It is a question of representing and eventually giving power to the people, not of their direct self-empowerment.<sup>694</sup>

*The legislator as transitional power?*

A possible explanation for Blanqui’s limitation in this respect might be found in Rousseau’s distinction, noted in Chapter 1, between the people and the people ‘when properly informed’.<sup>695</sup> ‘The people, being subject to the laws, must create them’, Rousseau explains, ‘it is the associates who have the right to determine the conditions

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construction of a “people” would be impossible without the operation of mechanisms of representation’ (Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 161).

<sup>693</sup> Hallward, ‘The Will of the People’, p. 23.

<sup>694</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>695</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 66.

of society.’ As we have seen, Blanqui likewise affirms that laws, as an act of the general will, must bear out that most quintessential of democratic principles: of the people, by the people, for the people. ‘But how are they to determine them?’, Rousseau goes on to ask. ‘Who will give it the foresight it needs to produce acts of will ... ? How can the blind multitude, often ignorant of what it wants, because it seldom knows what is good for it, accomplish by itself so large and difficult an enterprise as a system of legislation?’<sup>696</sup> Earlier, in the *Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau had similarly outlined how a truly popular government, ‘which has as its object the good of the people’, must ‘follow the general will in everything’. In order for the general will ‘to be followed’, however, ‘it must be known’ and, as such, ‘it must be clearly distinguished from the particular will’. Making this distinction is ‘always very difficult,’ Rousseau acknowledges, ‘and only the most sublime virtue is capable of giving the necessary enlightenment.’<sup>697</sup> Rousseau advances a form of socio-political education as the basis upon which the general will can be clearly known and so can be properly exercised.<sup>698</sup> Citizenship in this sense is a didactic construction – it must be taught and trained, assimilated and acquired through its instruction and practice.

A sustained discussion of who or what may fulfill the role of ‘the official appointed to preside over this form of education, which is certainly the state’s most

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<sup>696</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>697</sup> Rousseau, ‘Discourse on Political Economy’, pp. 9-10.

<sup>698</sup> ‘Public education, following rules prescribed by the government, and controlled by officers established by the sovereign, is therefore one of the fundamental principles of the popular or legitimate form of government. If children are brought up in common on terms of complete equality, if they are imbued with the laws of the state and the maxims of the general will, and instructed to respect them above everything, if they are surrounded with examples and objects that unceasingly speak to them of the tender mother who provides for them, of the incalculable gifts they receive from her and the gratitude they owe her in return – we cannot doubt that they will learn in this way to cherish each other like brothers, to want nothing except what is wanted by society, to replace the sterile and empty chattering of the sophists by the actions of men and citizens, and one day to become the defenders and fathers of their country, whose children they have been for so long’ (ibid., p. 23).

important affair’<sup>699</sup> is left to *The Social Contract*, in which the figure of the ‘legislator’ appears. Society, like all creations, requires solid, durable foundations, Rousseau insists. It follows that ‘the wise creator of institutions will not begin by drafting laws good in themselves, but will first consider whether the people for whom they are intended is capable of receiving them.’<sup>700</sup> Consideration of the people’s capacities, and whether they are sufficient as presently constituted or in need of full realisation, is thus vital. And since the latter is indeed the case, the legislator is presented with its task, a task that cannot be overstated. ‘The man who dares to undertake the establishment of a people has to feel himself capable of changing, so to speak, the nature of man’, writes Rousseau; the legislator ‘must deprive man of his own strength so as to give him strength from the outside, which he cannot use without the help of others. The more completely these natural strengths are destroyed and reduced to nothing, the more powerful and durable are those which replace them, and the firmer and more perfect, too, the society that is constituted’.<sup>701</sup> This wise man has the intellectual power to understand the mechanisms of enduring socio-political change, to transform the human nature of each individual so as to constitute the social body. The legislator guides the people, steering them from external manipulation. The legislator anticipates popular power and paves the way for the empowerment of an oppressed people, initiating the process through which the sovereign body is constructed and the general will exercised. The legislator is a creator – of a society, of a people, of a humanity.

Blanqui takes up and in many ways extends Rousseau’s basic assumptions, focusing his attention on the role of thought and knowledge in the construction of a voluntary political actor. Blanqui appears to conclude that to not be ‘properly

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<sup>699</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>700</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>701</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-77.

informed' is, by definition, to form part of the 'blind multitude' incapable at present of conscious volition. On many occasions Blanqui seems to conceive the enlightened revolutionary elite of which he forms part and the revolutionary power they wield as a form of Rousseau's legislator. The writings above on the post-revolutionary period certainly suggest these positions, yet perhaps the most striking example is found in the *Formulaire de Réception à la Société des Saisons*. The established order forms the point of departure. 'L'État social [est] gangrené', and as a result the people cannot govern itself immediately after the revolution. The text therefore asserts that 'pour passer à un État sain, il faut des remèdes héroïques'. (Note here the echoes of Rousseau's depiction of the legislator as 'a man extraordinary in every respect'.)<sup>702</sup> Hence the necessity of a temporary revolutionary power 'qui mette le peuple à même d'exercer ses droits.'<sup>703</sup> The task of the revolutionary power, for Blanqui and Rousseau alike, is to transform the people, to make it capable of exercising its collective will, capable of democracy.

That is not to say that Blanqui's reflections amount to a dismissal of the political agency of all but himself and his small revolutionary vanguard. Blanqui forever maintains that *a part* of the people is properly informed, namely the people of Paris, to the extent that the part (Paris) represents the whole (France). Hence Parisians' position as Blanqui's revolutionary agent par excellence. Not only do the enlightened workers of Paris represent the nation as a whole, however - they do so *in spite of* those very workers and peasants of the provinces who numerically comprise the majority of the nation yet remain under the sway of clerical domination and thus

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<sup>702</sup> Rousseau describes the legislator as almost a quasi-deity, 'a mind of a superior kind' taking 'decisions of [a] higher reason, beyond the scope of average men' (ibid., pp. 76-78). We might also note the extent to which the *Formulaire*'s corporal analogy of politics - an unhealthy state suffering from gangrene and in need of remedies to reach good health - follows Rousseau's evocation of 'the body politic' and society as comparable to the human body.

<sup>703</sup> 'Formulaire de réception à la Société des Saisons', *OI*, p. 383.



in their passive, miseducated ignorance are manipulated as the agents of reaction.<sup>704</sup> In Blanqui's thought revolution, democracy and emancipation are not a purely numerical question – they are first and foremost a matter of the actors bearing them as ideals, of locating who is capable of exercising conscious volition and offering encouragement, support, organisation and leadership in order to facilitate its practice. In all cases Blanqui's emancipatory volition comes back to a fundamental distinction: conscious thought. If 'les ennemis du peuple' are those who tell the proletariat that 'les habiletés de la main valent les puissances du cerveau. Les travailleurs dévoués à l'émancipation des masses connaissent bien tout le poison de cet encens.'<sup>705</sup> To be 'properly informed' is, first, to understand the strength and significance of one's own enlightened thought as the basis of one's capacity for conscious volition in the cause of emancipation and, second, it is to devote oneself to the emancipation of all, to those who remain uninformed and as such remain oppressed.

But do many other political theories not also privilege certain actors within a wider struggle? Whether for socio-economic (proletarians, peasants), cultural (students, intellectuals), geographic (urban masses) or political (disenfranchised plebeians) reasons, one group is frequently seen as the most susceptible to becoming the leading actor of an emancipatory struggle, often to the point of embodying the cause to the virtual exclusion of all other groups. Blanqui merely adopts another category - intelligence - as another means for conceptualising the context and conditions that give rise to political agency. If he gets caught in a trap, he is not alone in doing so.

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<sup>704</sup> Such an observation is made, for example, in a description from November 1848 of the Parisian workers as the embattled revolutionary minority facing the force of the reactionary majority, exactly as in 1793. See Blanqui, 'À la Montagne de 93. Aux socialistes purs, ses véritables héritiers !', *MA*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>705</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *MA*, pp. 213-214.

We have seen how Blanqui's voluntarism is built on a concept of conscious volition. Politics is a conflict of wills and collective will a positive, affirmative action to realise collective principles. These are the assumptions from which he insists on the practical dimensions of collective political action, in particular the manner in which a process of popular empowerment will have to overcome the resistance that will confront it. Blanqui maintains that if a conscious collective actor has the organised, unified and resolute collective will to prevail it can do so. Contrary to the beliefs of his 'utopian' contemporaries, Blanqui insists that it is indeed only through collectively working towards its realisation that the actual form of the project itself will appear. Moreover, we can now understand the role of duty, morality, resolute conviction and faith in Blanqui's wider project as the subjective resources sustaining a process of political volition. These are the factors according to which one not only *can* but also *must* will an idea or a principle to the end, to the exclusion of any form of renunciation or resignation. On all these points Blanqui provides major insights into voluntarist politics, revealing the extent to which within the wider voluntarist tradition his politics advanced on the theory and practice of those before him (Rousseau, Robespierre, Babeuf...) while in many ways anticipated the assumptions of those who followed him (Lenin, Castro, Guevara...).

When it comes to the question of post-revolutionary transition and the temporality of socio-political change, however, certain limits of Blanqui's thought appear. Although astute in its confrontation of a basic problem ignored elsewhere of the practical exigencies of social transformation in the wake of political revolution, a theory that generally tends towards conceiving an enlightened elite presiding over the transformation of the ignorant and passive masses in many ways prefigures the practice – and failures – of twentieth-century communism: purportedly temporary and

exceptional initial periods became the permanent state of things and the state, far from withering away, grew ever stronger. Jefferson, but also Rousseau in his concern for a government's inevitable tendency to usurp the sovereign power of the people and proposal of popular assemblies as a means of preventing this threat,<sup>706</sup> both offer useful correctives to these problems. Despite such limitations with regard to the temporality of transition, Blanqui's reflections on historical time more generally are, however, extremely rich, as we shall now see in the final chapter.

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<sup>706</sup> This issue is central to Book III of *The Social Contract*.

## Chapter 5 – History and Progress

‘La seconde d’après suit la seconde d’avant. Mais l’engrenage des choses humaines n’est point fatal comme celui de l’univers. Il est modifiable à toute minute.’<sup>707</sup>

‘Allons ! De la Patience, toujours ! De la résignation, jamais !’<sup>708</sup>

Questions of history and progress have generated more interest than all other aspects of Blanqui’s thought – and with good reason. Blanqui’s writings on historical time and the possibility for social change provide some of his most stimulating intellectual reflections, particularly when considered within the context of their author’s own life and the often embattled personal and political circumstances of their genesis. But the attention has not always resulted in convincing interpretation. Indeed, perhaps nowhere else has Blanqui’s thought been so misrepresented as on the concept of history.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to reconstruct Blanqui’s reflections on these themes in order to comprehend how they shape his project as a whole. As with the previous chapter we will be able to draw on our earlier discussions and conclusions, thereby forming a broader picture of Blanqui’s politics. I will begin with an examination of Blanqui’s thought on history and historical change. Rooted in thought, ideas and human consciousness, we see the distance between Blanqui’s view of history and that of Marx, allowing us to reflect on its overall merits and flaws, particularly with regard to questions of determinism, fatalism and the historical role of human agency. All these issues are present within *L’Éternité par les astres*, Blanqui’s most complex and enigmatic text. My reading aims to show that through maintaining

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<sup>707</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 61 [1 April 1869].

<sup>708</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 36 [n.d.].

the primacy of politics as Blanqui's central concern we can arrive at the core meaning of *L'Éternité* and see how it fits within Blanqui's overall project.

### **What is history?**

#### *Philosophical primacy*

We saw in Chapter 1 how Blanqui ascribes primacy to philosophy, ideas and thought in 'governing' the world and the societies it contains. Social change is, for Blanqui, the result of philosophical change.<sup>709</sup> It follows that on the question of the history of those societies and that world – a matter of great importance to Blanqui – as well as denoting in a conventional sense the occurrence of events and the passage of time, history in a more fundamental sense is the account of the ideas, thought, consciousness and morality that define and determine all material social arrangements. 'Faire de la philosophie, c'est étudier la pensée et la conscience. Faire l'histoire, c'est raconter le rôle de la conscience et de la pensée dans la vie des peuples.'<sup>710</sup> The foundational role of philosophy and thought in Blanqui's project thus leads him to conceive historical change as philosophical change; any given social transformation is fundamentally the product of a transformation in the ruling philosophy of that society.

A fascinating manuscript note sheds a great deal of light on the consequences of Blanqui's claims that 'l'omnipotence (la puissance de la) philosophie' constitutes the basic force of history, and is therefore worth quoting at length. In essence, historical change, Blanqui believes, denotes the supersession of an old philosophy with a new one. In the necessary transitional period of struggle between the two

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<sup>709</sup> See Blanqui MSS 9592(3) fo. 384 [n.d.].

<sup>710</sup> Blanqui, 'Candide', 3 May 1865, *MA*, p. 249.

opposing philosophies the primacy of philosophy itself may appear illusory; seemingly under attack from ‘des forces extra-philosophiques’ and subordinate to the socio-political influence of other ‘sciences’, philosophy may therefore appear destined to disappear altogether and be replaced ‘par des pouvoirs nouveaux d’un ordre tout différent’ in determining the structure of society as a whole. This is a profound error, Blanqui suggests. ‘Ces forces nouvelles ne sont que les éléments d’une nouvelle philosophie, bien qu’elles paraissent étrangères par leur nature à cette idée et en dehors de toute philosophie. Elles retrouveront leur assise régulière qu’après d’être traduites condensées en une philosophie qui, à son tour, sera la pensée publique et la souveraine de la société.’ Opposing ideas, the overcoming of a seemingly stable philosophy and its corresponding social order, the emergence and eventual establishment of a new philosophy and a new social order – one might suggest the presence of a certain dialectical motion to historical change here. Blanqui continues: ‘Ce qu’on appelle les temps de transition ne sont précisément que le temps de la durée de la guerre entre deux philosophies, l’une qui s’en va, l’autre qui vient.’ Rather than a negation of philosophy as such, historical change is a process of philosophical struggle between conflicting ideas and then of the synthesis of the philosophy and the real, material structures of society, Blanqui concludes.<sup>711</sup>

Despite their primacy in governing social arrangements, then, for Blanqui philosophies and ideas do not simply conceive and realise themselves *a priori*. Philosophies are conceived by humanity and realised in a war that can only be waged by the militants of those philosophies in order to change and, in Blanqui’s case, to perfect humanity through intellectual consciousness and reason. It is in this important respect that history, as Blanqui views it, is above all *human* history; history is the

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<sup>711</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3) fo. 384-385 [n.d.].

realm of human *thought* and *activity*. As noted in Chapter 1, in many ways Blanqui appears to share Hegel's insistence on human thought, understanding and consciousness as the determinant factors in the making of history. For Blanqui as for Hegel, so Spitzer notes, humanity is 'both the agent and the product of endless change.'<sup>712</sup> Against Fourierism, a doctrine built on the 'base fausse' of 'la fixité des instincts, l'identité constante de l'homme avec lui-même', for Blanqui the transformation and perfection of humanity and human reason as the key to social justice is the most basic historical task.<sup>713</sup> If Fourierism's foremost contradiction is its attempt to construct 'une organisation définitive sur la permanence des penchants et des passions', a move consistent with its failure on the social question to offer anything other than the conservation of the existing order,<sup>714</sup> Blanqui's thought is animated by movement and transformation at the level of people and social arrangements alike. Blanqui offers a view of history and progress as rooted in the process – again depicted in near dialectical terms - of humanity becoming more conscious of and perfecting itself through the exercise of its own thought:

tout le développement des choses terrestres s'est accompli d'après la loi opposée, le changement perpétuel et insensible, la mutation progressive des êtres. L'homme est le produit d'une transformation continue, aussi lente dans ses effets que persistante dans sa marche. Il abandonne et il acquiert. Il se renouvelle dans ses instincts et ses facultés, comme le corps dans ses tissus. La permanence des instincts et leur utilisation par une méthode harmonique est donc une théorie radicalement contraire à notre nature et aux lois physiques.

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<sup>712</sup> Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 44.

<sup>713</sup> As Blanqui affirms: 'Tout n'est pas admirable ni séduisant dans l'homme. Il a de vilains cotés et de sales inclinations' (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 188 [23 April 1869]).

<sup>714</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 187-189.

Tous les instincts, à un moment donné, ont leur utilité et concourent à la conservation des individus et de l'espèce. Mais le temps les modifie au moyen de l'homme lui-même qui progresse par le perfectionnement continu du cerveau.<sup>715</sup>

Like Hegel, Blanqui insists on the development of human consciousness through the exercise and perfecting of human thought as the primary motor of historical change and progress, which again is *human* change and progress, for the capacity to collectively arrange social, political and economic relations in line with morality and justice is the corollary of collective self-consciousness. For Blanqui only in thinking and understanding ourselves as free can we actually become free. But between consciousness of freedom, of justice, and its realisation forever lies political action. History is the account of the political struggle this process of human transformation entails. History is indeed as much the account of humanity becoming collectively conscious of its capacity for collective self-determination and actually imposing that capacity as it is the account of the forces actively preventing, undermining or undoing this process through miseducation, deceit and manipulation. 'L'expérience des siècles démontre que le seul agent du progrès est l'instruction, que la lumière jaillit (presque) uniquement de l'échange (et du choc) des pensées humaines, que par conséquent tout ce qui favorise et multiplie cet échange est le bien, que tout ce qui supprime ou l'entrave est le mal.'<sup>716</sup> Consistent with his wider contempt for unprincipled vacillation or ostensible neutrality, it is in this sense of history as the site of conflict and struggle between two profoundly moral positions – enlightened emancipatory justice and ignorant repressive injustice – that Blanqui rejects the notion of 'histoire

<sup>715</sup> Ibid., fo. 187-188. On this point see also Blanqui, 'Les apologies de l'usure', n.d., *CSI*, p. 145.

<sup>716</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 64 [n.d.].



impartiale’.<sup>717</sup> Blanqui’s history is at once *human* and *political*; it is the process whereby humans consciously strive, through struggle and conflict, in the face of obstacles and resistance, to realise their freedom and achieve justice.

The modern age, born out of ‘la civilisation Gréco-Romaine’ and overcoming ‘l’ère de sang et de ténèbres’ of the Middle Ages and the reign of Christianity through the advent of the printing press – the instrument of progress par excellence<sup>718</sup> – is defined by this struggle for freedom – the freedom of the people, as equals, to collectively determine the organisation of their social, political and economic life. To be modern is to be conscious of one’s own freedom, aware of oneself as a self-determining actor capable of moral judgement, and to actively strive for the collective realisation of this freedom as the foundation of an egalitarian, self-governing social order.<sup>719</sup> With echoes of the manner in which Hegel advances the attainment of the consciousness of freedom as the standard by which to judge advances in history, Blanqui sees the exercise of conscious volition as the criterion from which to plot and judge the socio-political development of peoples and civilizations. Genuine historical judgment can be attained, then, but the capacity to judge history itself presupposes consciousness. History, in other words, is the result of the history it recounts – both historical change and its narration are attained through the exercise of consciousnesses. ‘Dans les procès du passé devant l’avenir, les mémoires contemporains sont les témoins, *l’histoire* est le juge, et l’arrêt est presque toujours une iniquité, soit par la fausseté des dépositions, soit par leur absence ou par l’ignorance du tribunal’, Blanqui notes. ‘Heureusement l’appel reste à jamais ouvert,’

<sup>717</sup> See Blanqui, ‘Résignation’, April 1863, *CSII*, pp. 109-111.

<sup>718</sup> The Middle Ages, Blanqui writes, ‘n’est autre chose que le règne du Christianisme’ and so marked a period of regression that was only halted and undone with the advent of the printing press. See Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 157 [n.d.].

<sup>719</sup> Cf. ‘La démocratie avec la liberté, c’est l’idée moderne, l’égalité des citoyens’ (Blanqui MSS 9586, fo 403 [n.d.]).

he adds, ‘et la lumière des siècles nouveaux, projetée au loin sur les siècles écoulés, y dénonce les jugements de ténèbres.’<sup>720</sup> Though differing sharply in their respective criteria of analysis - Hegel’s advocacy of the freedom produced in Germany through the advent Christianity is quite clearly directly at odds with Blanqui’s Paris-centred atheism – the far East nonetheless exemplifies for both Hegel and Blanqui how the absence of conscious thought results in the absence of freedom and progress. If for the former ‘[t]he Orientals have not attained the knowledge that Spirit – Man *as such* – is free; and because they do not know this, they are not free’,<sup>721</sup> the latter, too, invites us to ‘[voir] l’Inde et la Chine. L’Europe n’a jamais pu égaler les Hindous dans le tissage du cachemire. Comme artistes, comme artisans, les Chinois sont au moins nos rivaux. Et cependant quelle dégradation ! Pourquoi ? La pensée est absente.’<sup>722</sup> It is this insistence on thought and consciousness from which comes morality and justice as the yardstick of historical progress, and not on production and all it entails, which explains Blanqui’s suggestion that beyond trading with China ‘on paiera un service aux chinois en pillant deux ou trois de leurs palais et de leurs villes pour les civiliser et les décrasser de leur barbarie.’<sup>723</sup>

Insofar as the attainment of communism is presented as the goal, the ‘terme final’ of human association, Blanqui’s conception of history can be said to have broad stages of development. The extent of humanity’s ‘double vie, la vie individuelle et la vie de relation’, from which arouse ‘un double instinct, celui de la conservation personnelle et celui de la conservation sociale’, were, Blanqui wrote in *Candide*, both variable and subject to change according to ‘le degré de lumière’. As such both were the consequence and the measure of the level of public enlightenment. ‘Ces échanges

<sup>720</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 59 [n.d.].

<sup>721</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 1956), p. 18.

<sup>722</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, 1869-70, *CSI*, pp. 214-125.

<sup>723</sup> Blanqui MSS 9587, fo. 358 [16 April 1862].

successifs marquent les étapes de l'humanité. À toute date, la conscience publique est le reflet et le thermomètre de la science publique.<sup>724</sup> History is, for Blanqui, the account of 'la variabilité de la morale selon les temps et le lieux, sa progression plus ou moins lente ou rapide, mais toujours proportionnelle au développement des lumières'.<sup>725</sup> Those spiritualists who insist on the unity and inflexibility of an absolute morality 'seront un jour eux-mêmes déclarés des barbares', he thus states, 'violateurs de la morale'.<sup>726</sup> Indeed, a form of 'communisme primitif' characteristic of early forms of social arrangements is instructively dismissed as 'diamétralement le contraire de la vérité'. Again, this assertion derives from the basic assumption of cerebral change as the causal factor behind social transformation. Since cerebral transformations are 'l'œuvre des siècles',<sup>727</sup> it follows that communism will be the future socio-political expression of the enlightenment achieved through universal instruction. Writing under the similar heading of 'communisme, avenir de la société', Blanqui depicts a 'marche constante du genre humain' in which the future will clearly reveal 'que tout progrès est une conquête, tout recul une défaite du communisme ... ; que tous les problèmes successivement posés dans l'histoire par les besoins de notre espèce ont eu une solution communiste, que les questions aujourd'hui pendantes, si ardues, si pleines de trouble et de guerre, n'en peuvent pas davantage recevoir d'autre, à peine d'aggravation du mal et de chute dans l'absurde'.<sup>728</sup> All progress in human affairs, from taxes and various forms of commercial and industrial associations to the army, education and government, are 'innovations communistes'; all have been

<sup>724</sup> Blanqui, 'Candide', *MA*, p. 248.

<sup>725</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 74 [n.d.]. Or as he likewise reasserts elsewhere: 'l'étude historique du genre humain démontre la fausseté de cette prétendue pérennité de la morale. La morale est une résultante, toujours mobile et variable, du mouvement intellectuel accompli par les hommes' (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 163 [n.d.]).

<sup>726</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 74 [n.d.].

<sup>727</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme primitif', April 1869, *CSII*, p. 73.

<sup>728</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSI*, pp. 173-174.

achieved, and in time will be necessarily transcended, as stages of ‘cette voie’ towards communism. The idea of communism, Blanqui accordingly notes, ‘a dit à peine son premier mot. Avant d’en être à son dernier, elle aura tout changé de face. Nous ne sommes encore que des barbares.’<sup>729</sup> With self-consciousness – and this is a crucial point – we locate ourselves within an ongoing movement, a wider process of achieving socio-political progress through the realisation of self-consciousness. The extent of our collective association, itself tied to the level mass enlightenment, provides ‘le véritable instrument/et thermomètre du progrès’.<sup>730</sup> Blanqui’s awareness of contemporary’s society’s relative barbarism thus serves to reinforce self-conscious human activity as history and historical change in two coupled respects: realising self-consciousness is humanity’s self-narrated history *and* the self-conscious task of the historical actor as such.

This in no way implies that history is an invariable linear sequence of events or that communism is humanity’s natural fate or inevitable destiny, however. For Blanqui there is no ‘filiation constante dans les événements’; every era is not the logical product of the preceding one.<sup>731</sup> Though we shall consider these questions of determinism and alternatives at greater length below, in essence Blanqui stands for political possibility over historical necessity. To reject historical necessity is to renounce any purported form of objective or immutable immaterial forces, laws, morals or processes in the realm of human activity; it is to insist on the primacy of *pensée-volonté* in determining – and so in *changing* – human affairs; it is to explicitly open the door to alternatives and bifurcations, to contingency and discontinuity. In the realisation of communism, then, ‘[c]haque pas dans cette voie est la conséquence d’un progrès dans l’instruction. Toute victoire de l’ignorance, au contraire, est une atteinte

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<sup>729</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>730</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 59 [15 March 1869].

<sup>731</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 61 [1 April 1869].

à l'association.<sup>732</sup> Blanqui's response to the problem of progress as possibility is voluntarism. 'Sans doute nos fautes ou nos vertus peuvent ralentir ou accélérer la marche de la civilisation,' he states, 'ce qui nous laisse la disposition entière de notre destinée.'<sup>733</sup> History as possibility is at once a difficult task and an opportunity. Humans have the capacity, indeed the duty and obligation, to create their own history and realise their own destiny. But only conscious, decisive action here and now can create and continue to create the path to future emancipation; only through this undetermined process can humanity arrive at its ultimate realisation - the definite outlines of which are unknown and unknowable, of course, and as such of no concern to Blanqui.<sup>734</sup>

### *Historical materialism?*

An important area that has not always received the convincing interpretation it deserves is the extent to which Blanqui's thought is analogous to historical materialism. Some have advanced Blanqui's view of history as, if not a forerunner, then at least broadly similar in orientation to that of Marx and Engels.<sup>735</sup> This can be seen, it is claimed, when, building on passages from the defense speech,<sup>736</sup> the *Rapport* asserts the class dimensions of the civil war in France, describing a country

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<sup>732</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme primitif', *CSII*, p. 69.

<sup>733</sup> Blanqui, 'Les apologies de l'usure', *CSI*, p. 146.

<sup>734</sup> 'Mais que le chemin s'abrège ou s'allonge par notre fait, à chacune de ses étapes, lente ou rapide, l'humanité est saisie par sa loi de développement qui l'arme et l'approvisionne pour la continuation du voyage. Mais laissons l'avenir à lui-même' (ibid., p. 146).

<sup>735</sup> 'La lutte des classes est fondée en effet sur une argumentation de type économique', Le Nuz says of the January 1832 defence speech. Similarly Le Nuz suggests with regard to the writings in *Le Libérateur*: 'La conception de Blanqui de la lutte de classe est encore justifiée par l'analyse de l'histoire. Bien que moins approfondie que celle de Marx, elle est néanmoins antérieure et approchante' (Le Nuz, 'Introduction', *OI*, p. 89; 'Introduction', *OI*, p. 250). See also Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 98, 102 and Dommanget, *Auguste Blanqui à Belle-Île*, pp. 10, 12.

<sup>736</sup> See in particular the description of the war between rich and poor as being, 'sous une nouvelle forme et entre d'autres adversaires, la guerre des barons féodaux contre les marchands qu'ils détroussaient sur les grands chemins' (Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', 12 January 1832, *MA*, p. 64).

gripped by a conflict between three groups and three opposing interests: the upper class, the middle class and the people.<sup>737</sup> Blanqui does indeed depict a class war that is also a historical struggle, with July 1830 as merely its latest manifestation, abruptly punctuating an ongoing conflict.<sup>738</sup> Yet perhaps aside from the notable exception of Walter Benjamin's Blanqui-infused 'materialist conception of history', which we shall look at later, to suggest that in Blanqui one discovers the germs of a more classical form of Marxian historical materialism is misleading on three counts, two of which can be seen in the *Rapport* itself, the other finding clear refutation in later writings.

First, it overlooks the explicitly national dimensions of Blanqui's thought that have already been noted and commented on in the preceding chapters. France, Blanqui writes in 1832, is engulfed in a struggle between the people, the true representatives of the nation, and republican 'patriotes' on the one hand, and the bourgeoisie and 'royalistes', the lackeys of the *Sainte-Alliance* of European reaction, on the other.<sup>739</sup> Blanqui's central concern is the political and intellectual dynamics that define and differentiate national peoples and struggles. Second, and following the first point, it overlooks the lack of any critique of political economy, Marxian or

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<sup>737</sup> Blanqui's analysis could be summarised as follows: France's capitulation in 1814-15 was the work of 'la classe bourgeoise' who, as ever more concerned with material self-interest than liberty, opened their arms to France's foreign enemies, supporting the Restoration in order to bring an end to a war that was beginning to hinder commerce. Under Louis XVIII the bourgeoisie entered into an alliance with 'les hautes classes' – Bourbon supporters emanating from the nobility and rich landowners – in return for the Charter and the Chamber of Deputies. Bourgeois support for the reactionary and repressive Restoration and their role in this marriage of self-interest continued happily, Blanqui is keen to point out, until Charles X's attempts from 1825 to re-establish the nobility's domination and regress to the principles of the *ancien régime* prompted a struggle between the upper and middle classes in the years leading up to the July Revolution. The bourgeoisie began to gain greater power through their increasing dominance in the Chamber of Deputies, posing a threat to a government ultimately ruling in the name of the upper class. The people, meanwhile, were in a state of political retreat. Disorganised and demoralised in the face of the foreign invasion and having lost faith in the cause of liberty, the events of 1815 caused the people to fall silent and submit to their oppressors – the middle and upper classes. Yet the people had not resigned themselves to their fate, as soon became clear in the summer of 1830. See Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', 2 February 1832, pp. 81-83.

<sup>738</sup> As Blanqui insists at the beginning of the speech: 'aucun parti nouveau n'a surgi du sein et comme conséquence de cette révolution' (ibid., p. 80).

<sup>739</sup> See ibid., pp. 90, 95.

otherwise, in both France and elsewhere. Blanqui's depiction of class war is one emanating from political history, not from the historical evolution of the mode of production, as historical materialism would of course later advance as determining social relations. Accordingly, Blanqui never seeks to offer a critique of production, exchange or political economy more generally.<sup>740</sup> In Blanqui's eyes, moreover, the war between republicans and royalists that began in 1789 is still the principal battle line in France and, by extension, in Europe.<sup>741</sup> Blanqui does suggest the bourgeoisie is driven by commercial imperatives while the masses seek to end their exploitation, and class clearly has some socio-economic bearing for him. Yet as I suggested in Chapter 3, the primacy of politics, or more specifically national politics, and not economics, is key to understanding Blanqui's conception of class, class struggle and its relation to history in turn. Finally, to conflate Blanqui's and Marx's views of history is to overlook the foundational role of thought and intelligence in history and historical change developed at greater length in Blanqui's late thought as outlined above. Blanqui never made a sustained attempt to reprieve or develop this notion of a historical class struggle after 1832-34, hence it remains unrepresentative of his concept of history as a whole which, more Hegelian than Marxian, advances human thought and the consciousness of man as determinant of social relations, and not vice versa.

What does this mean for Blanqui's project? Its distance from a more classical form of Marxian historical materialism rooted in a critique of political economy has both its uses and flaws. As we shall see below, it enables Blanqui to avoid any objective forms of determinism (economistic, natural, scientific or theological) that

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<sup>740</sup> 1830, for example, is described in the *Rapport* as a 'crise politique' provoked by Charles X's ordinances and the suppression of the press, and indeed throughout the speech the revolution is explained first and foremost in political terms. See *ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>741</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

may lead to fatalism and the political disengagement and disempowerment it begets, or to reduce in any way collective conscious volition as the ultimate determinant force of historical change. In terms of the actor, we have seen how Blanqui's flexible notion of the proletariat likewise emphasises the extent to which collective actors are the result of collective action, of *pensée-volonté*, which in turn shows the importance of organising, concentrating and directing this capacity. Blanqui reminds us that socio-economic exploitation or domination do not in themselves inevitably engender the agency through which their redress can occur; ultimately it is conscious, purposeful, determined political action alone that creates a collective actor (again we shall return to this below with Marx and Hobsbawm). The major limitation, however, is the implications this has for understanding the grounds upon which this collective action appears. To be clear, Blanqui is not ignorant of the constraints of circumstance. He does not think that collective action appears or can be made to appear out of nothing, with no consideration of when and why it emerges. The image of a reckless adventurer, forever insistent on seizing power 'no matter how, no matter when, by no matter whom'<sup>742</sup> is an unfounded distortion. 'Il faut du courage,' states Blanqui, 'mais point de témérité.'<sup>743</sup>

Spitzer provides a useful survey of this point, highlighting Blanqui's support for non-insurrectionary tactics amongst the masses (electioneering, strikes, propaganda) alongside his 'reluctant putschism', according to which he dismissed his supporters' calls for a seizure of power that was not propelled by a mass movement (February 1848, the duration of Second Empire) or, again owing to unpropitious circumstances, was compelled against to his own better judgment to be involved in or

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<sup>742</sup> M. Ralea cited in Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 135.

<sup>743</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 356 [18 April 1866].



lead ultimately unsuccessful coup attempts (15 May 1848, 14 August 1870).<sup>744</sup> One might also recall the politically repressive climate of the July Monarchy in which Blanqui's secret societies were conceived, effectively forcing such subversive groups to adopt clandestine activity.<sup>745</sup> Although the basic tenets of his philosophy could be said to have pushed Blanqui towards this top-down conception of political action, the political context obviously has a significant part to play in the conception of Blanqui's conspiratorial politics. To this we might add one particularly insightful and on the whole illustrative statement from Blanqui's private correspondence. As we saw in Chapter 4, Blanqui's conception of revolutionary duty is one that is neither involuntary nor the product of unenlightened manipulation. A voluntarist revolutionary duty, it follows, cannot be a form of blind, unreasoned intervention. 'Notre devoir à tous est de nous y jeter sans hésitation,' a letter from 1879 affirms, though without then adding the essential qualification, 'dès que les circonstances l'ordonnent.' At this moment, but only at this moment, Blanqui's conception of revolutionary duty demands the dedication of one's entire force and energy to the situation in order to seize the opening as it presents itself: '« Fais ce que dois,

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<sup>744</sup> See Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, ch. 7. Spitzer's conclusion is instructive: 'The record of his failures would certainly seem to indicate a persistent indifference to the objective revolutionary potentialities of his time. Paradoxically, this conclusion is contradicted by the details of his revolutionary career. In every political crisis after 1839 with which we connect Blanqui, we find that he actually attempted to postpone the violent consummation of the movements he had helped to organize because the immediate circumstances were not propitious for a revolution' (ibid., p. 145). One of the most striking examples of Blanqui's 'anti-putschism' is found in the 'Discours du Prado', 25 February 1848, *MA*, pp. 134-135, when he asserts: 'Si nous nous emparons du pouvoir par un audacieux coup de main ... qui nous répondra de la durée de notre puissance ? ... Ce qu'il nous faut à nous, c'est le peuple immense, les faubourgs insurgés, un nouveau 10 août. Nous aurons au moins le prestige de la force révolutionnaire.'

<sup>745</sup> As Harsin notes, the '[r]epublican opposition was driven underground, and the new societies exchanged the goal of open debate for rigid orthodoxy and unquestioning obedience. The attack on political rights began with the association law of April 1834, a blunt instrument that required all clubs to obtain police permission no matter how often they met, or how large the group, or whatever their purpose. After this came the famous September Laws of 1835, made possible by public revulsion over the Fieschi assassination attempt ... . It was in this changed legal environment that the *Société des Familles* emerged from the remnants of the SDHC [*Société des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*]' (Harsin, *Barricades*, pp. 106-107, 110).

advienne que pourra ». Il n'existe pas d'autre opportunité. Cette maxime seule est toujours opportune.<sup>746</sup>

Though Blanqui's writings arguably place less sustained emphasis on the point, attention is certainly drawn on numerous occasions to the constraints imposed by contexts and circumstances. Evidently Blanqui recognises that successful revolutionary activity presupposes the existence of certain conditions; revolutionary strategy therefore had to adapt to and reflect these conditions.<sup>747</sup> But he does not go far enough, and in many crucial respects his analysis remains inadequate. Indeed, it is largely with *political* contexts and conditions that Blanqui is concerned. What about underlying economic considerations? Blanqui's disdain for the 'pseudo-science' of political economy is explicit, a corollary of his renouncing any worldview that fails to take sufficient account of rationally apprehended moral judgement, justice, as the ultimate measure of human affairs. Economists, so Blanqui explains, 's'occupe de ce qui est et se soucie peu de ce qui devrait ou pourrait être. Pour lui, justice, iniquité, sont des mots vides de sens. Le fait est tout, le droit rien.' He continues, with even greater political emphasis: 'Le socialisme n'a point à ménager l'économie politique qui lui fait une guerre déloyale. ... L'économie politique n'a jamais été une science.

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<sup>746</sup> Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 457 [June-July 1879].

<sup>747</sup> For instance, Blanqui wrote when advising his young protégée Tridon in April 1866: 'Je conçois qu'on cherche à pénétrer dans les masses, pour connaître leurs sentiments, pour y infuser un peu d'énergie, d'activité. Mais il faut alors rester dans les limites d'une grande prudence, ne pas s'aventurer dans des vellétés d'action, impuissantes et sans issue. Peut-on, aujourd'hui, organiser les masses pour la bataille ? Je ne le crois pas et ne le conseille pas. Alors, qu'on se tienne tranquille, qu'on ne fasse rien dans le peuple qu'avec réserve et avec cette idée toujours présente qu'on ne peut pas jouer la partie et aboutir à une fin finale. En rien, il ne faut agir au hasard, sans but arrêté ; c'est une ruine. Cette action vague et indéterminée me semble aujourd'hui le défaut capital du groupe. Il n'a point de plan fixe.' Blanqui therefore recommend, as the political tasks of the day, 'la persuasion, l'activité, la prudence en même temps. Ne heurtez pas, évitez les divisions, les ruptures, ménagez les personnes.' In order to maintain the unity of the central vanguard, avoid arrest and imprisonment and thereby enable it to carry out the principal task of spreading the revolutionary thoughts and ideas within the masses on which revolutionary action was based, revolutionary strategy had to adapt to the constraints of the situation within Imperial France. Hence Blanqui's conclusion: 'Le groupe ne peut aujourd'hui conquérir de l'empire que par la plume' (Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 357 [18 April 1866]).

C'est de l'anatomie froide et brutale ... une leçon sur le cadavre.'<sup>748</sup> The idealism of Blanqui's socialism here becomes clear. Analysis of what (materially) is provides no obvious account or means for achieving what (socially) ought to be. Rather than the contradictions inherent within capitalism, only the idea and the militants of the idea provide the potential for a new social order, Blanqui believes. Its scientific pretensions may be contentious, yet for a militant politics to do away with any form of political economy is without question a glaring omission. Taking sufficient account of grounds from which thoughts, ideas and morals develop, of the processes that, though not ultimately determinant, certainly shape political struggles and the actors waging them is a necessary component of any emancipatory project. Should one not in fact seek to combine critique of political economy *with* a politics of principled conviction? Is the challenge not to align the real and the ideal, the objective and the subjective forms of determination, whilst retaining 'the primacy of the latter'?<sup>749</sup>

### *Equality or catastrophe*

'Le bon droit et l'avenir sont à nous ; le jour de la justice arrivera.'<sup>750</sup> With these assurances of future victory in spite of the short-term constraints and defeats that marked the six months following July 1830 Blanqui set the agenda and tone for his January 1832 defence speech. Popular revolutions can be suppressed, Blanqui similarly maintained a year later, but one cannot suppress the truths borne out of the event. 'Il est aisé de mettre la baïonnette sur la poitrine à des hommes qui ont rendu leurs armes après la victoire. Ce qui sera moins facile,' Blanqui declares, warning his adversaries and emboldening his allies, 'c'est d'effacer le souvenir de cette victoire.

<sup>748</sup> Blanqui, 'Les apologies de l'usure', *CSI*, pp. 136, 134-135. See also Blanqui, 'L'économie politique sans morale', March 1870, *CSII*, p. 58.

<sup>749</sup> Hallward, 'The Will of the People', p. 17.

<sup>750</sup> Blanqui, 'Déclaration du Comité provisoire des Ecoles', 22 January 1831, *MA*, p. 60.

... Nulle force humaine ne saurait repousser dans le néant le fait qui s'est accompli.'

Something happened in July. Something was achieved that cannot be undone, forgotten, covered up or destroyed. Further defeats may occur, the forces of reaction may return. But all such efforts cannot prevent the birth - however prolonged, however painful - of the new republican order and the rule of the people. And so concludes the speech just as it begins, in emphatic, uncompromisingly combative style:

Vous avez confisqué les fusils de Juillet. Oui, mais les balles sont parties. Chacune des balles des ouvriers parisiens est en route pour faire le tour du monde ; elles frappent incessamment ; elles frapperont jusqu'à ce qu'il n'y ait plus debout un seul ennemi de la liberté et du bonheur du peuple.<sup>751</sup>

With an audacious forcefulness these lines encapsulate the essential message of the speech as a whole: where injustice prevents liberty and general happiness, where inequalities and suffering are enforced through violence, no consensus will occur, no compromise will be offered. Accepting the realities of the social conflict, the people will take their struggle for victory to the end - and they will be victorious. The people, Blanqui reaffirmed barely a month later, in terms that echo, if not complement and complete, the defence speech's remarkable denouement, 'renversera de ses bras de géant la bourgeoisie et l'aristocratie coalisées. La révolution est en marche, rien ne peut l'arrêter.'<sup>752</sup>

A pronounced conviction strikes us in these early writings: the revolution, the ideals of freedom and equality, *will be triumphant*. For all his 'ultra-voluntarism'

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<sup>751</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', 12 January 1832, *MA*, p. 79.

<sup>752</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', 2 February 1832, *MA*, p. 94.

Blanqui seems strangely deterministic, at least in the sense that an ultimate victory appears to be beyond doubt. How can this be so? Following these texts from 1831-32 one of the most intriguing aspects of 1834's *Le Libérateur* is indeed its sustained reflection on the future triumph of equality. Blanqui's point of departure is the conviction that in the struggle between privilege and equality only one side can win, leaving the other to perish. He thus addresses the obvious question posed by his own analysis: who will succumb in this struggle? Why will they be victorious? The seeming certainty of the victory of equality appears to rest on four modes of reasoning – moral (the 'supériorité morale' of equality ensures its victory over privilege),<sup>753</sup> logical (workers hold the power since society could not function without their labour; the idle landowners are ultimately dependent on the workers),<sup>754</sup> political ('nous pouvons, sans illusion, nous persuader que les nations marchent, les Français en tête, à la conquête définitive de l'égalité absolue')<sup>755</sup> and historical (the morals and ideas of the nation's past revealed that the 'refonte sociale' Blanqui proposes is one that 'la France réclame impérieusement et qui est dans sa destinée').<sup>756</sup> These factors enable Blanqui to conclude confidently, and with a generous dose of intellectual optimism: 'C'est facile aujourd'hui de s'apercevoir que le principe de propriété est sur son déclin.'<sup>757</sup>

This apparent belief in the inevitable triumph of equality expressed throughout *Le Libérateur* is unrealistically optimistic, to say nothing of the facile reasoning upon which such naively bold assertions are based. And yet if we look beyond these

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<sup>753</sup> See Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', February 1834, *MA*, pp. 123, 125; Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', 2 February 1834, *MA*, pp. 110, 112.

<sup>754</sup> See Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, p. 124; Blanqui, 'Qui fait la soupe doit la manger', p. 294.

<sup>755</sup> See Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>756</sup> See Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 108; Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, pp. 121, 125).

<sup>757</sup> Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', p. 125. See also Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 110.

assurances and unqualified claims of future victory, Blanqui's basic assumption is that equality will be victorious because it *must* be. The insistence derives from the fear, and the real possibility, of defeat and failure. It is unsurprising, Blanqui contends, that in this struggle between equality and privilege 'la victoire demeure invariablement à l'égalité, puisqu'il faut qu'elle triomphe ou que l'humanité périclite'.<sup>758</sup> Equality is still 'la condition nécessaire' or an essential political project in the sense of a state of affairs that must be achieved by human action in order to avoid universal catastrophe.<sup>759</sup> Close reading reveals, then, the underlying logic at work in all these early writings: the belief in the possibility of equality's ultimate victory, but only if the need to struggle for that victory is fulfilled. Recall that for Blanqui to take up the struggle for equality – for it is indeed an actual struggle and task, an endeavour and enterprise demanding resolute commitment – is, as he also affirmed in 1834, to 'continuer un mouvement admirable de progrès qui s'est fait jour avec une irrésistible persévérance, en brisant l'un après l'autre les obstacles qui renaissent incessamment pour entraver sa marche.'<sup>760</sup> The nineteenth-century revolutionary movement is therefore a continuation of past struggles<sup>761</sup> that *must* confront and overcome the obstacles and barriers to progress; and where privilege and the enemies of equality remain, hurdles and obstructions will continually and inevitably appear. The movement for equality is 'admirable' precisely because it only emerges through perseverance and persistence in the face of ever-recurring difficulties and constraints.

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<sup>758</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 112. See also the similar assertion that 'si le droit de propriété était destiné à vaincre, c'est un triste avenir que celui qui s'ouvrirait devant nous' (Blanqui, 'La richesse sociale doit appartenir à ceux qui l'ont créée', *MA*, p. 125).

<sup>759</sup> Blanqui, 'Notre drapeau, c'est l'égalité', *MA*, p. 109

<sup>760</sup> Blanqui continues: 'Or, tous ces obstacles n'ont pas disparu ; car l'ennemi qui les suscite, le privilège, est encore debout, poursuivant contre l'égalité, mère du progrès, cette guerre implacable qui a duré dix-huit cents ans' (ibid., pp. 109-110).

<sup>761</sup> See, for example, the defence speech's assertion that July 1830 'est venue pour servir de complément à nos quarante années révolutionnaires' (Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', *MA*, p. 76). As Spitzer notes: 'All Frenchmen who devoted themselves to human progress were, for Blanqui and many others, but the executors of the testament of the great Revolution and at the same time its heirs' (Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 121).

Far from the inevitable product of the inevitable movement of history, it was only through a series of forceful interventions that equality had imposed itself, creating the conditions for its own realisation and progress. It is in this respect that when ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’ begins with the assertion that the careful study of geology and history reveals how ‘l’humanité a commencé par l’isolement, par l’individualisme absolu, et qu’à travers une longue série de perfectionnements, elle doit aboutir à la communauté’, the choice of modal verb, *devoir*, is essential.<sup>762</sup> Its meaning of ‘should’ and ‘must’,<sup>763</sup> both of which stand to Blanqui’s ascription of ‘cette vérité’ to this course of development, cannot escape our attention. Communism is, for Blanqui, a necessary task. The same goes for the writings from 1831-32 cited above: the revolution will only continue and will only be victorious through conscious, deliberate action. It is imperative to work, with resilient devotion and persistence, to realise equality in order to avoid the catastrophic consequences of failure.

In contemplating the relationship between human history and human agency Blanqui is not alone, of course. Eric Hobsbawm’s subtle reading of the *Communist Manifesto*, a text which contains claims regarding the seemingly ‘equally inevitable’ fall of the bourgeoisie and victory of the proletariat, confronts this very problem. ‘The Manifesto’, writes Hobsbawm, ‘has been read primarily as a document of historical inevitability, and indeed its force derived largely from the confidence it gave its readers that capitalism was inevitably destined to be buried by its gravediggers’. Rousing rhetorical flourishes proclaiming the certainty of victory also characterise much of Blanqui’s early writings, as we have seen. And given the even greater

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<sup>762</sup> Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 173.

<sup>763</sup> Here I follow Hallward’s observation that ‘Fanon stresses the need to think the actuality of both necessity, actuality and possibility, in an emancipatory dialectic whose essential ambiguity is already expressed in his own choice of modal verb. With its literal meaning of duty and obligation, *devoir* or *on doit* means both “one must” and “one should”’ (Hallward, ‘Defiance or emancipation?’, p. 31).

political premium Blanqui places on the resolute subjective determination to prevail than Marx and Engels it is unsurprising that the tenor of his writings would share in, if not go further than, the enthusiastic confidence of the *Manifesto*. ‘Yet contrary to widespread assumptions’, Hobsbawm continues, ‘inasmuch as it believes that historical change proceeds through the men making their own history, it is not a determinist document. The graves must be dug by or through human action.’<sup>764</sup> The same is true for Blanqui. Emphasis on certain victory is, paradoxically, a surface symptom of a deeper anti-determinist assumption that only though fully committing oneself to think and act in line with the possibility of victory can it be realised.

In Blanqui’s project historical change and progress are likewise products of instruction, of organisation, of volition - of human praxis. Certainly the goal of the revolution, a 1836 text co-written by Blanqui states, is ‘l’établissement complet du règne de l’égalité’ – and to know and determine one’s basic ends is indeed crucial. But first principles must be conceived, the text goes on to affirm, within and through the decisive work required in the actual collective striving towards these goals: ‘il ne suffit pas de déclarer vaguement les hommes égaux ... il faut convaincre les prolétaires que l’égalité est possible, qu’elle est nécessaire’.<sup>765</sup> Such is the political function of Blanqui’s journalism: to teach, to convince the people that equality is both *possible* and *essential* – possible in that humans have the capacity to realise it, essential in that failure to do so spells victory for injustice and inequality. This certainly goes a long way in explaining why Blanqui would readily indulge in hyperbole regarding certainty of victory. The written word is intended above all to

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<sup>764</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction’, in Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 27.

<sup>765</sup> Blanqui and Hadot-Desages, ‘Propagande démocratique’, 1835, *OI*, p. 314.



show that revolution is and must be possible; it must generate the confidence and conviction for the action required in converting the possible into the real.<sup>766</sup>

Like Blanqui, Marx and Engels depict a struggle between oppressor and oppressed that could end ‘either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.’<sup>767</sup> Like Blanqui, Rosa Luxembourg advances a clear choice between ‘socialism or barbarism’.<sup>768</sup> Like Blanqui, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara have no illusions that the ‘people would triumph or be defeated ... either we are all saved or we all sink’.<sup>769</sup> In any given instance resolute dedication to and confidence in emancipation, equality and justice does not ‘exclude the alternative: “common ruin”’<sup>770</sup> – on the contrary. Blanqui’s conviction is forged through a confrontation with the real, immediate possibility of such a catastrophe, and thereafter resolving to avoid it at all costs. ‘C’est le passé et l’avenir, le privilège et la liberté, le vieux monde et le monde nouveau, l’immobilisme et le progrès aux prises dans un combat éternel’, Blanqui declares. ‘On peut crier: Alarme ! Ce sont les ennemis! Nous avons toujours devant nous la contre-révolution.’<sup>771</sup> It is only in the recognition of the continual, imminent threat of reaction and regression that one can,

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<sup>766</sup> Cf. Che Guevara’s assertion that the ‘favourable circumstances’ of revolution are ‘consciousness of the necessity of change and confidence in the possibility of this revolutionary change.’ However, Che, more than Blanqui, insists that these two subjective factors and conditions must be ‘combined with the objective conditions’. See Che Reader, ‘Guerrilla Warfare: A method’, in *Che Guevara Reader*, p. 75. On this point see also Che Guevara, ‘Cuba: Historical exception or vanguard in the anti-colonial struggle?’, in *Che Guevara Reader*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>767</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 35.

<sup>768</sup> Bensaïd and Lowy also discern in the writings from *Le Libérateur* the precursor of Luxembourg’s maxim. See Bensaïd and Löwy, ‘Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist’, p. 28.

<sup>769</sup> Che Guevara, ‘Political sovereignty and economic independence’, in *Che Guevara Reader*, p. 102.

<sup>770</sup> Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction’, p. 28.

<sup>771</sup> Blanqui, ‘Débats parlementaires de février sur l’enseignement’, n.d., *NDNM*, pp. 54-55. Blanqui would reiterate the necessity of sounding the alarm against an imminent threat again in 1851 (see Blanqui, ‘A propos des clameurs contre l’*Avis au peuple*’, April 1851, *MA*, p. 168), in 1862 (‘Une seconde d’oubli, on est mort. Le péril est connu’ [Blanqui MSS 9587, fo. 378 [1862]]) and in 1879 (‘Notre rôle, ce me semble, est de prendre l’offensive, de dénoncer à haute voix la conspiration orléaniste du pouvoir, de tirer la nation de sa sécurité funeste, de lui signaler l’imminence du péril, en un mot, de sonner l’alarme’ [Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 541 [25 September 1879]]).

one must, make a choice and undertake the task of struggling against it with the urgency and determination it requires.<sup>772</sup>

Despite first appearances it would be entirely misrepresentative to label any of these writings as determinist. Blanqui's moments of rhetorical exuberance do not undermine so much as paradoxically highlight and reinforce his voluntarist anti-determinism. Throughout his life and work Blanqui forever remained faithful to his youthful prescription that 'on ne doit jamais accuser que soi, il n'y a point de hasard ni de fatalité dans la vie, et cela est désespérant.'<sup>773</sup> The responsibility for failure and defeat, the myth of historical necessity, the task of social progress – Blanqui is the first to recognise the forbidding state of human affairs. And yet he is also the first to recognise that this should not, this cannot, lead to resignation. The only response, the duty in fact, is to assume the task, to individually and collectively take up the struggle against supposed historical necessity, externally imposed fate or destiny. Rather than an aberration or anomaly, then, these early statements prepare the ground for the anti-determinism that infuses Blanqui's mature thought.

### **The poverty of positivism**

The defeat of 1848 had a profound impact on Blanqui. To a greater extent than any of the many other major political events that punctuated the course of his life the revolution and its aftermath sharpened his early anti-fatalist view of history. Though the intellectual consequences of 1848 may not have been immediately manifest, with Blanqui still assuring in November 1848, even in the aftermath of the June Days, that

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<sup>772</sup> Walter Benjamin was particularly taken by this idea of an imminent threat, highlighting Blanqui's 'firm resolve to snatch humanity at the last moment from the catastrophe looming at every turn' (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* p. 339). Cf. Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>773</sup> Blanqui, 'Lettre à Adélaïde de Montgolfier', 20 May 1831, *OI*, p. 162.

‘[l]e temps nous donnera la victoire sans combat’,<sup>774</sup> by the early 1850s, as Louis-Napoléon strengthened his grip on power and France slid back towards autocratic rule, the weight of events and force of circumstance clearly compelled Blanqui to confront anew his avowed belief of 1832 that ‘toute révolution [est] un progrès’.<sup>775</sup> Combined with a critique of Auguste Comte’s positivism, these events informed a sustained reflection on political fatalism and historical determinism that would dominate much of Blanqui’s thinking during the Second Empire.

### *Against fatalism*

Just as the realm of human action is completely devoid of the laws that structure the realm of nature Blanqui likewise applies this principle to human history. ‘La Fatalité,’ Blanqui states, ‘c’est la loi à la place du caprice.’ To advance ‘une règle immuable à la place du caprice’ is the ‘inverse du gouv. [*sic*] humain.’<sup>776</sup> Blanqui’s absolute opposition to ‘[p]réétendue fatalité des lois économiques qui régissent la société’ insists in every respect that ‘[p]artout où l’homme intervient, il ne peut plus être question de loi, mais de caprice et d’arbitraire.’<sup>777</sup> Blanqui’s conception of *pensée-volonté* as determinant of humanity and human affairs excludes as a matter of course of all forms of transcendent, immaterial laws or authorities, be they spiritual or scientific - and indeed one note instructively couples the two together for this very reason. ‘Le Positiviste est un demi-Dieu qui sait tout, qui embrasse tout, depuis les derniers confins de la Mathématique transcendante jusqu’aux plus minces détails de la *sociologie*, passée, présente et future’, Blanqui writes. ‘Du haut de son trône omniscient, il laisse choir un regard de dédain sur le myrmidon qui ose se prétendre

<sup>774</sup> Blanqui, ‘Réponse à la demande d’un toast pour le banquet des travailleurs’, November 1848, *MA*, p. 150.

<sup>775</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, p. 76.

<sup>776</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 280 [n.d.].

<sup>777</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 146 [27 April 1868].

son pareil et lui dit comme à un chétif insecte : « qu'y-a-t-il entre nous ? »<sup>778</sup> The mask of Comte's purported 'science' conceals the face of 'une religion ultra-aristocratique, le système des castes, l'asservissement des masses, la domination absolue des Riches'. Comte's is a pseudo-science for the status quo, offering the inviolability of empiricism and 'des vérités *scientifiques démontrées*' to guard against the threat of revolution.<sup>779</sup> God or the market, in the eyes of Blanqui's materialism both are no more than intellectual constructions in the deliberate service of specific interests and aims, for ultimately 'l'univers est un effet et ne saurait être une cause, par la raison qu'il est matière, et que la cause initiale est nécessairement une intelligence unie à une volonté.'<sup>780</sup> Such is the basis of Blanqui's politics of possibility, of cutting through the supposedly immutable (and therefore immensely complex) social field to present humans as the masters of their own destiny. Should they recognise it, choose to assume it and work to realise it, humans can make their own history. For revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces alike, political possibility not historical necessity created the past just as it will create the future. Scientific, spiritual or socio-economic claims to the historically immutable and the socially inevitable merely serve to obfuscate the human agency consciously enforcing them.

This last point is key. Since Blanqui's central concern is human history his critique of fatalism operates a double movement: 'Doctrin exécrable du fatalisme historique, du fatalisme dans l'Humanité.'<sup>781</sup> To champion historical determinism is to rationalise and condone all humanity's past afflictions as an inevitable part of an

<sup>778</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 66 [n.d.].

<sup>779</sup> 'Il lui suffit de s'intituler *science*,' Blanqui continues, 'de s'affubler du nom universellement respecté pour devenir aussitôt sacrosaint. Personne n'ose le regarder en face. On s'incline avec humilité et on lui tire bas son chapeau' (Blanqui MSS 9590(1) fo. 60 [1 April 1869]; emphasis in original). See also Rancière, 'The Radical Gap', p. 21.

<sup>780</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 53 [15 April 1868].

<sup>781</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 60 [1 April 1869].

equally inevitable process. For Blanqui it follows, and even more critically, that positivism, indeed any 'objective' form of determinism, is an inadequate philosophical conception of human history that legitimises human suffering. The failure or refusal to take account of human experience and moral judgment based on an enlightened sense of justice forms the thrust of the anti-positivist statements that pervade his writing during the Second Empire. Positivism 'n'admet que la loi du progrès (quand même et) continu, la fatalité. Chaque chose est excellente à son heure, puisqu'elle prend dans la série des perfectionnements. Tout est au mieux toujours. Nul critérium pour apprécier le bon ou le mauvais. Ce serait du préconçu, de l'à-priori, de la métaphysique.' As positivism 'exclut l'idée de la justice',<sup>782</sup> in the eyes of these 'fatalistes de l'histoire, adoreurs de ce fait accompli', Blanqui writes, '[t]outes les atrocités du vainqueur, la longue série de ses attentats sont froidement transformées en évolution régulière, inéluctable, comme celles de la nature.'<sup>783</sup> At every step Blanqui's socialist humanism is conceived in absolute opposition to 'la doctrine de la fatalité des souffrances sociales'.<sup>784</sup> Outside of nature all must be conceived first and foremost in terms of humanity and social justice because all is human in cause and consequence – it has always been so and will never be otherwise. Since all forms of social organisation are consciously conceived and imposed by humanity itself, nothing in human history is inevitable, natural or predestined; nothing outside of the moral principles historically developed through human consciousness provide an arbiter for the assessment of human relations past and present. It is in this sense that for Blanqui enlightened reason and social justice go hand in hand. The intellectually conceived and developed notion of justice is Blanqui's sole criterion for historical and political judgement. When the illusions of natural, economic or spiritual

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<sup>782</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 64 [n.d.].

<sup>783</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 61 [1 April 1869].

<sup>784</sup> Blanqui, 'Les apologies de l'usure', *CSI*, p. 136.

laws, tendencies and transcendent authorities are stripped away to leave all but the foundational *pensée-volonté* of humanity determining all social arrangements, justice, the highest emanation of human thought, solely remains. The importance of consciousness in the writing and popular understanding of history reasserts itself here, too. Justice and freedom - the sole standards of historical judgement and the pre-eminent results of enlightened consciousness - can alone guard against the rewriting of history. 'Les sophismes des charlatans ont effrontément transformés huit années de déclin en huit années de progrès', Blanqui lamented in 1879.<sup>785</sup>

Blanqui applies this critique of historical determinism with equally uncompromising force to his own political camp. To the extent that revolution reconfirms the power of the people and redefines the thinkable and the possible Blanqui forever sees it as a basic and necessary act of progress. But he does so not to the exclusion of regression and reaction. After 1848 this conviction became far more pronounced. With the recognition that 'chaque avortement entraîne une réaction plus terrible' as witnessed in 'la catastrophe' of Louis-Napoléon's 2 December 1851 coup d'état, the choice between eternal domination and poverty or armed struggle acquired an even greater sense of urgency.<sup>786</sup> Behind renewed strategic imperatives lay more fundamental philosophical assumptions, however. It was in the fallout of 1848, when the promises of 'la victoire du peuple' had been destroyed in mass bloodshed, political betrayal and a resurgent Bonapartism, that Blanqui penned one of his most effective attacks on the politics of positivist determinism. Written in June 1850 from

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<sup>785</sup> Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 457 [June-July 1879].

<sup>786</sup> Blanqui, 'Lettre à Maillard', 6 June 1852, *MA*, pp. 179-180; Blanqui, 'Avis au peuple', 25 February 1851, *MA*, p. 167; Blanqui, 'A propos des clameurs contre l'*Avis au peuple*', *MA*, p. 171. The use of childbirth analogy here in particular highlights the shift in Blanqui's thinking from January 1832 when, as alluded to above, he insists: 'La France a conçu dans les embrassements sanglants de six mille héros ; l'enfantement peut être et douloureux ; mais les flancs sont robustes, et les empoisonneurs doctrinaires ne la feront point avorter' (Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze', p. 79).

his cell in Douzens prior to his transfer to Belle-Île in October, Blanqui castigates the '[f]atalisme stupide du parti révolutionnaire' and its attempts to rationalise defeat, in all its human carnage, as merely part of history's inexorable march towards progress. The 'parti révolutionnaire', Blanqui writes,

ne gagne de batailles que pour sa ruine, empressé toujours de rendre aux vaincus le pouvoir aussi tôt que la soif de la vengeance. Puis il se console par les hymnes sur la marche irrésistible de l'esprit humain et la certitude de son triomphe définitif. Trente ou quarante ans de despotisme, le sang de millions des martyrs, les douleurs de millions d'infortunés, qu'importe à la sérénité de ces placides contemplateurs ? Qu'est-ce pour eux que deux ou trois générations sacrifiées ? Deux ou trois chutes de feuilles.<sup>787</sup>

For Blanqui the philosophical error of fatalism has the gravest socio-political implications, which explains above all the significant attention it is accorded in his writings: fatalism fails to recognise the basic need to seize, maintain and wield power in order to initiate the process of transformation and protect this process from its enemies; fatalism promotes a form of cold, dispassionate detachment, if not indifference, to the suffering caused in the name of ostensibly immutable objective forces and processes; as such, while this human suffering, far from relenting, increases and intensifies, fatalism creates waiting over engaging, passivity over activity.

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<sup>787</sup> 'Ils semblent prendre plaisir à plonger le règne de la contre-révolution, en lui restituant ses armes,' Blanqui adds, 'chaque fois qu'une secousse imprévue les lui arrache des mains, sauf à reprendre le sourire béat et la phrase stéréotypée de Crétinisme musulman : « C'était écrit. Le Progrès ne peut pas reculer. » En attendant, le passé continue son retour offensif' (Blanqui MSS 9590(2), fo. 465 [June 1850]).

*The tradition of the oppressed*

Blanqui's dismissal of positivist and determinist historiography is thus pegged at every moment to his resolutely humanist advocacy of morality and social justice. For Blanqui, there is a clear continuity between historiographical and political practice. The historian, like the pseudo-scientific sociologist or political economist, is no innocent onlooker. The idea of political, social or economic laws of history is a 'mauvaise plaisanterie'<sup>788</sup> precisely because of its social implications. 'C'est une immoralité, c'est un crime, de glorifier le passé quand même, de le justifier par de prétendues lois immuables, d'invoquer la dignité de l'histoire qui commande le respect ou même l'indulgence pour les horreurs des temps évanouis.'<sup>789</sup> In Blanqui's eyes, the people are key to understanding past and present alike; the history of the people, and the historian's relation to the people as the object of their study, is tied to the people as the subject of the present struggles that form part of this history. In both cases morality and justice come centre stage. To denounce social injustice and oppression in the present is to do likewise for the past. In the eyes of positivist determinism, however, past generations are nothing more than '[f]euilles mortes ! on en fait litière.' Blanqui continues:

L'Histoire s'esquisse à grands traits, du plus beau sang-froid, avec des monceaux de cadavres et de ruines. Nulle boucherie ne fait sourciller ces fronts impassibles. Le massacre d'un peuple, évolution de l'humanité. ... Quant aux populations et aux villes que le fléau a couchées sur son passage, ... nécessité ... marche fatale du progrès. Tout est bien qui a enfanté le présent, c'est-à-dire nous. Pas d'avances trop dispendieuses pour un si beau produit. ... Tout est

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<sup>788</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 278 [n.d.].

<sup>789</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1) fo. 61 [1 April 1869].



réglé d'avance, comme un papier de musique, pour les pauvres petits automates, et à perpétuité, s'il vous plaît. Religion perpétuelle, dynastie perpétuelle, lois perpétuelles ...<sup>790</sup>

Revolution is condemned by those parties and interests this historiography defends for no other reason than it subverts the most basic 'law' of history: 'Notre rôle était de mourir, le vôtre de tuer.' The people's capacity to overcome its prescribed social position – 'nous sommes sortis de notre rôle' – is the greatest fear of the established order, Blanqui states; it is why, compared to the Terror, 'les boucheries de la réaction thermidorienne' go unmentioned. The French Revolution thus marked the moment at which

les victimes cessent de tendre la gorge avec résignation. Elles se dressent et frappent à leur tour. Elles sont frappées, mais elles rendent coup pour coup, souvent avec usure ! ... Etrange nouveauté ! Scandale inouï ! ... Quel renversement de toutes les lois divines et humaines ! N'est-ce pas la Providence elle-même qui a créé ces catégories d'opprimés et d'opresseurs, assignant pour destinée aux unes la tranchant, aux autres la poignée de la hache ? Et on se révolte contre les décrets ! Les plébéiens ne sont-ils pas nés pour souffrir ?<sup>791</sup>

The people are the cannon fodder of positivist historiography. Their experiences are

<sup>790</sup> Blanqui, 'Le communisme, avenir de la société', *CSZ*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>791</sup> Blanqui MSS 9581, fo. 39 [15 January 1859]. See also the earlier assertion that for the forces of reaction: 'il n'est pas question de tout ce sang ; on trouve qu'il a coulé tout naturellement. Mais 93 ! ... Que l'on ne plaint que les bourreaux, quand par hasard ils succombent parce que leur métier est d'être bourreaux non victimes, que les pauvres, le peuple, sont faits pour être victimes et qu'il est scandaleux qu'ils changent quelquefois de rôle' (Blanqui, 'Lettre à [Adelaïde de Montgolfier]?', 19 or 29 September 1831, *OI*, p. 585).

meaningless, their lives expendable. ‘Qui voudrait prêter l’oreille aux cris et aux pleurs de ces vils troupeaux tombant par milliers dans les abattoirs de l’histoire ?’, asks Blanqui.<sup>792</sup> Poverty and suffering, famine and disease, slaughter and destruction - all must bow before the unending tyranny of teleology. Like a form of Hegelian cunning of reason, for Blanqui the Comtean appeal to an inner logic of history, in which humanity unknowingly becomes the instrument of history’s rational designs, legitimises the immoral injustice of the present by way of legitimising the immoral injustice of the past. And just as in 1832 Blanqui noted the impression of the people as an ‘instrument des classes moyens ... des gladiateurs qui tuent et se font tuer pour l’amusement et le profit des privilégiés’,<sup>793</sup> these passages from the *Critique Sociale* exercise no restraint when characterising the champions of historical necessity from the future perspective of the ‘poupées’ of history:

Dans l’histoire de l’Humanité, vous êtes la page du choléra et de la peste. Les barbaries et les sottises de vos aïeux étaient la faute de l’ignorance, le résultat de convictions aveugles. Vous avez fait le mal, vous, sciemment, avec préméditation, par noir égoïsme. Car vous n’avez jamais cru à rien qu’à votre intérêt, ignobles sceptiques, et à cet intérêt, vous avez voulu sacrifier jusqu’à vos plus lointains neveux.<sup>794</sup>

Just as the suffering, oppression and injustice inflicted against the people must speak through any present account of history worth the name, the future emancipation of the

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<sup>792</sup> Blanqui MSS 9581, fo. 39 [15 January 1859].

<sup>793</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 77.

<sup>794</sup> Blanqui continues, with no less venom: ‘Qui vous avait donné mandat de stipuler en notre nom, de penser et d’agir pour nous ? Avons-nous consenti la traite tirée sur notre travail ? Tartufes! sous prétexte d’assurer notre bien-être, vous avez dévoré d’avance le fruit de nos sueurs, nous crevant de votre a mieux les yeux et les oreilles pour nous empêcher de voir et d’entendre’ (Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, p. 195).

people, as the task of that history, will avenge their historical suffering in a cry of ‘vengeance à tous les siècles’.<sup>795</sup> Through consciousness the people, no longer passive subjects but empowered, free actors, will attain the capacity for historical judgment and will speak for themselves; they will recount *their* history.

### Reappraising the astronomical hypothesis

The manner in which Walter Benjamin’s late writings, particularly the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, echo the lines above has caught the attention of several readers - and rightly so.<sup>796</sup> The nineteenth-century revolutionary so captivating to Benjamin in many ways seems to synthesize ‘the discontinuity of historical time; the destructive power of the working class; the tradition of the oppressed’ advanced as the basis of the materialist conception of history in a preparatory note of the *Theses* and translated into the conceptual framework of the work itself.<sup>797</sup> But it is with the ‘hypothèse astronomique’ Blanqui penned in 1871 while imprisoned at the Fort Taureau that Benjamin is most associated. *L’Éternité par les astres* forms the central ‘*passage*’, to borrow from the title of Miguel Abensour’s essay, linking the two men.

Benjamin makes two claims regarding *L’Éternité par les astres* of significant import for Blanqui’s politics. First, he contends that the text signals a political surrender. With *L’Éternité*, Benjamin tells us, Blanqui offers a ‘resignation without hope’ that was to be ‘the last word of the great revolutionary’.<sup>798</sup> Second, he asserts that Blanqui rejects any notion of progress. According to Benjamin, although in *L’Éternité* ‘Blanqui displayed no antipathy to the belief in progress; between the lines,

<sup>795</sup> Blanqui MSS 9581, fo. 40 [15 January 1859].

<sup>796</sup> See in particular Abensour, *Les passages Blanqui*, pp. 19-20, 45 and Abensour and Pelosse, *Libérer l’Enfermé*, p. 17.

<sup>797</sup> Abensour, *Les passages Blanqui*, pp. 40-41; Hallward, ‘Blanqui’s bifurcations’, p. 40.

<sup>798</sup> Benjamin, ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Exposé of 1939’, *The Arcades Project*, p. 26.

however, he heaped scorn on the idea' - a position that was, in fact, consistent with 'his political credo'.<sup>799</sup> Both claims are misleading, and yet both have shaped the interpretation of Blanqui's politics. The Blanqui-Benjamin encounter is indeed a problematic one, such that it is necessary to make a detour via Benjamin, via the stars, in order to re-address these issues.

The argument Blanqui outlines in *L'Éternité par les astres* is at once simple and complex: to properly comprehend the text as a whole requires systematically working through of each of its constituent assumptions, yet once these are established it generally reads like a straightforward and coherent (if scientifically flawed) mathematical formula. In what follows I trace the steps by which Blanqui builds his analysis in order to arrive at an understanding of the text and to consider how we might interpret its wider significance within Blanqui's project.

### *The finite, the infinite*

The opening line of *L'Éternité par les astres* advances the first of three basic theses that will inform Blanqui's overall analysis. 'L'univers est infini dans le temps et dans l'espace, éternel, sans bornes et indivisible.'<sup>800</sup> Since comprehension of infinity exceeds the limits of human intellect it remains and shall remain an enigma to us.<sup>801</sup> Incomprehension of eternity should not call into question the knowledge that we *cannot* know, however, or lead us to claim the universe must therefore be limited. Contrary to our presumptuous tendency to think otherwise, earth and humanity are but a minute part of an immense interstellar system. Human beings are 'presque des intrus

<sup>799</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 339.

<sup>800</sup> Blanqui, 'L'Éternité par les astres', 1872, *MA*, p. 318.

<sup>801</sup> 'Cette certitude absolue de l'infinité du monde, jointe à son incompréhensibilité,' Blanqui acknowledges, 'constitue une des plus crispantes agaceries qui tourmentent l'esprit humain' (ibid., p. 319). As Hallward notes, this is a typical presumption prior to Georg Cantor's pioneering work on the infinite. See Hallward, 'Blanqui's bifurcations', p. 38.

dans le groupe que notre gloriole prétend agenouiller autour de sa suprématie.<sup>802</sup> Even the sun, the supposed centre of the universe, ‘n’est qu’un point imperceptible dans l’étendue.’<sup>803</sup> All cannot escape the finitude of their material forms.<sup>804</sup> Relative to the infinity of the universe, the course of finite material life, whatever its form, is ‘un tout petit point, et pas un millième de seconde. Entre l’étoile et l’éphémère, l’éternité ne distingue pas.’<sup>805</sup>

To this conception of an infinite and eternal universe Blanqui adds the assumption, taken from the contemporary findings of spectral analysis, of a finite number of material elements (‘corps simples’). The breakthroughs of *spectrométrie* show these elements are not specific to the earth but are ‘partout identiques’ in the material composition of all the universe’s celestial bodies; the potentially one-hundred or so ‘corps simples qui forment notre Terre constituent également tous les globes sans distinction.’<sup>806</sup> The physical laws (gravitation and centrifugal) combining and governing these elements are in turn equally universal. The universe, Blanqui therefore writes, ‘n’est qu’un ensemble de familles unies en quelque sorte par la chair et par le sang. Même matière, classée et organisée par la même méthode, dans le même ordre. Fond et gouvernement identiques.’<sup>807</sup> Taking these two assumptions together, Blanqui supposes that because new atoms cannot be created and because the natural laws combining and ordering them are immutable the material forms these atoms can produce are necessarily finite.<sup>808</sup> Within the universe there certainly exists multiple forms this matter can take; the possible number of elemental ‘type-

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<sup>802</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>803</sup> Ibid., p. 342.

<sup>804</sup> Ibid., pp. 342-343.

<sup>805</sup> Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>806</sup> Ibid., pp. 327, 353.

<sup>807</sup> Ibid., pp. 357-358.

<sup>808</sup> As was noted both after the text’s initial publication and again more recently, Blanqui here overlooks the extent to which these combinations of elements might themselves form altogether new elements and the creation of new material forms in turn. See Hallward, ‘Blanqui’s bifurcations’, p. 39.

*combinations*' is indeed 'inexprimable', 'incalculable'. But the basic matter itself, and therefore the total number of possible combinations, remains universally invariable.<sup>809</sup>

On the basis of the first two assumptions a problem imposes itself. 'Il ne peut se créer un atome de matière,' Blanqui notes, 'et si les étoiles trépassées ne se rallument pas, l'univers s'éteint.'<sup>810</sup> Without the continuous rebirth and resurrection of matter the universe would be necessarily finite, too. Confronting the alternative of 'la résurrection des étoiles, ou la mort universelle' Blanqui chooses the former.<sup>811</sup> It follows that just like all other celestial bodies the matter composing human beings and the planets they inhabit is eternal and immanent but only 'dans ses éléments et son ensemble'.<sup>812</sup> Eternal rebirth and resurrection of the basic set of elements into new finite material forms are the means through which the universe's vitality is ensured and a vacuum avoided.<sup>813</sup> Once a certain form of matter reaches the end of its finite existence the elements composing it take on a new form through a process of shock and atomisation. 'Les métamorphoses se succèdent sans interruption', he explains, without adding that at no point does this ceaseless, furious dying and rebirth, this 'pandémonium' of material regeneration, ever depart from the strict laws of nature.<sup>814</sup> Such is the process through which elemental matter is transformed, obeying 'la loi commune du changement' set and imposed by nature on the one hand while avoiding 'l'immobilisation éternelle' that would lead to 'le marasme et bientôt la décomposition' of the universe on the other.<sup>815</sup> Within the spatio-temporal infinity of

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<sup>809</sup> Blanqui, 'L'Éternité par les astres', *MA*, pp. 322-323, 359-360.

<sup>810</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353

<sup>811</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353

<sup>812</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342. 'Si leur durée n'est qu'une seconde,' Blanqui asserts, 'leur renaissance n'a point de limites' (*ibid.*, p. 377).

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>814</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>815</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 346, 350.

the universe, then, ‘le renouvellement des mondes par le choc et la volatilisation des étoiles trépassées s’accomplit à toute minute dans les champs de l’infini.’<sup>816</sup>

Placing this finite material set and these natural laws within the spatio-temporal infinity of the universe leads Blanqui to assume a process of eternal repetition; insofar as a finite number of elements are subject to an infinite process of shocks, atomisation and transformations within a spatially and temporally infinite universe, the logical consequence is the creation of infinite copies of the same limited number of elemental combinations or types. Alternatively put, spatio-temporal infinity decrees that once the limit of different original elemental combinations is reached and the number of types exhausted – as by definition it forever has been – new original combinations are unattainable, copies unavoidable. Therein resides the relation between the finite and the infinite: ‘Ces combinaisons, malgré leur multitude, ont un terme et, dès lors, doivent se *répéter*, pour atteindre à l’infini.’<sup>817</sup> Since ‘l’infinité des globes ne peut surgir que de l’infinité des *répétitions*’ the universe is made and remade in an unending cycle. Repetition is matter’s response, its only possible response, to the call of the universe’s spatio-temporal infinity.<sup>818</sup>

Strictly following the logic of these three propositions – an infinite and eternal universe, a limited set of material elements governed by universal natural laws, infinite repetition of the same elemental combinations – Blanqui does not hold back in assuming the consequences infinity prescribes. It leads him to speculate that other worlds materially identical to our own, ‘du jour de sa naissance au jour de sa mort’, have existed, currently do exist and will again exist within the spatio-temporal infinity of the cosmos.<sup>819</sup> The same applies to other humanities, too. Since human beings, like

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<sup>816</sup> Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>817</sup> Ibid., p. 359.

<sup>818</sup> Ibid., pp. 361-362.

<sup>819</sup> Ibid., p. 366.

animals or things, are one possible form of elemental combination every one of us ‘a vécu, vit et vivra sans fin’ in the form of infinite identical twins, copies of ourselves who themselves have lived, who will live and who are simultaneously living identical lives, at every second of our lives, across eternity. ‘Tout être humain est donc éternel dans chacune des secondes de son existence’, Blanqui concludes.<sup>820</sup> Separated by infinite times and distances the universe nonetheless contains an infinite number of exact copies of our own earth ‘avec tous ses hôtes sans distinction, depuis le grain de sable jusqu’à l’empereur d’Allemagne’, as well as an infinite number near exact copies, of course.<sup>821</sup> ‘Sur chacun d’eux se succèdent toutes les choses matérielles, tous les êtres organisés, dans le même ordre, au même lieu, à la même minute ou ils se succèdent sur les autres terres, ses sosies’, Blanqui explains. ‘Par conséquent, tous les faits accomplis ou à accomplir sur notre globe, avant sa mort, s’accomplissent exactement les mêmes dans les milliards de ses pareils.’<sup>822</sup> Identical worlds and identical peoples lead to identical histories, both individual and collective, however great or small, from the assassination of Caesar through the Battles of Valmy, Marengo and Waterloo to Blanqui himself, sat at his desk in his cell on the Fort Taureau writings these lines. Every moment of every life is played out, again and again, for eternity.

### *Fatalism against fatalism*

But whereas these finite elemental combinations infinitely recreate the same species, peoples and worlds at a purely *material* level - and here lies the decisive (and often overlooked) point of the text as a whole - the same is not true at a *political* level. ‘Toutes les humanités, identiques à l’heure de l’éclosion, suivent, chacune sur sa

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<sup>820</sup> Ibid., pp. 377-378, 380.

<sup>821</sup> Ibid., pp. 363, 366.

<sup>822</sup> Ibid., p. 369.



planète, la route tracée par les passions, et les individus contribuent à la modification de cette route par leur influence particulière.’ In other words, humanity’s capacity for choice and commitment means that biologically identical human beings are not *destined* to produce politically identical human histories. Humanity, Blanqui reaffirms, ‘n’a pas le même personnel sur tous les globes semblables ... chacun de ces globes, en quelque sorte, a son Humanité spéciale, sortie de la même source, et partie du même point que les autres, mais dérivée en chemin par mille sentiers, pour aboutir en fin de compte à une vie et à une histoire différentes.’<sup>823</sup> The material world may be ‘une véritable Terre-sosie ... jusqu’aujourd’hui du moins. Car demain, les événements et les hommes poursuivront leur marche. Désormais, c’est pour nous l’inconnu.’<sup>824</sup>

Understanding the underlying logic at work here, and how it does not contradict the assertions above regarding historical repetition, relies on recalling the principle foundations of Blanqui’s thought, namely the strict division between the immutable laws and processes of the natural world and the undetermined and changeable domain of human affairs. *L’Éternité* imposes the exact same separation, with the exact same consequences. ‘La nature n’a que des lois inflexibles, immuables’, Blanqui states. ‘Tant qu’elles gouvernement seules, tout suit une marche fixe et fatale. Mais les variations commencent avec les êtres animés qui ont des volontés, autrement dit des caprices. Dès que les hommes interviennent, surtout, la fantaisie intervient avec eux.’<sup>825</sup> These lines, which constitute some of the pivotal

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<sup>823</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>824</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>825</sup> Ibid., pp. 370-71. Note the similarities here with a reflection (probably from the late 1860s) on the relationship between Paris, France and what is at stake in revolutionary socio-political transition: ‘Chez l’homme, la croissance se fait d’elle-même par le développement organique. C’est une simple question d’âge. Dans une nation les choses se passent tout autrement. La minorité se prolonge ou s’abrège par le fait des hommes eux-mêmes, de leur bon sens ou de leurs sottises, par les fantaisies des passions et de la pensée. Ce développement n’est point, comme celui des organismes, soumis à une loi immuable, enfermé dans un cercle fatal. L’Enfance ici point durer de longs siècles ou quelques années, aboutir

passages of *L'Éternité*, can be seen to reaffirm the most basic assumptions of Blanqui's dualism as outlined in Chapter 1. *L'Éternité* in no way departs from the theoretical framework constructed before 1871. 'La fatalité', Blanqui defiantly insisted following France's allegedly unavoidable surrender to the Prussians in October 1870, 'est la loi de l'univers matériel et n'est point celle de l'humanité, qui ne relève que d'elle-même.'<sup>826</sup> A year later these assumptions accompanied Blanqui to the Fort Taureau where they would directly underpin the 'hypothèse astronomique'. In fact, the restatement of this dualism does not even constitute an obscure extract or passing inference in *L'Éternité* itself: Blanqui reiterates exactly the same point lest its essential meaning be misunderstood. Relative to the material composition of finite planets travelling through infinite time and space even the greatest achievements of human volition are utterly inconsequential, he observes. Human activity 'ne trouble jamais sérieusement la marche naturelle de phénomènes physiques, mais', Blanqui then immediately adds, and just as above the conjunction introduces the key point, 'elle bouleverse l'humanité.' Impotent against nature's terrestrial laws and insignificant within the infinite history of the cosmos, human volition is nonetheless the agent of the shifts and changes in *human* affairs that dictate the course of *human* history. 'Il faut donc prévoir cette influence subversive qui change le cours des destinées individuelles ou modifie les races animales, déchire les nations et culbute les empires.' Both individually and collectively, '[c]'est parmi eux-mêmes que les hommes font des victimes et amènent d'immenses changements. Au souffle des passions et des intérêts en lutte, leur espèce s'agite avec plus de violence que l'océan

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à la virilité ou à l'avortement et à la mort (se nouer et finir par la mort) sans avoir atteint l'âge d'homme' (Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 173 [n.d.]).

<sup>826</sup> Blanqui, 'Un dernier mot', October 1871, *MA*, p. 296.

sous l'effort de la tempête.'<sup>827</sup> The division between nature and humanity, formally enacted in *L'Éternité* with the 'mais', again attests to Blanqui's conception of history as the site and product of human will and action, of struggle and conflict, of discontinuity and change. Impotence and insignificance within nature and the cosmos in no way denote impotence and insignificance in human history and politics. If the natural world 'ne connaît ni ne pratique la morale en action, [c]e qu'elle fait, elle ne le fait pas exprès',<sup>828</sup> it is because these are the very capacities and resources – enlightened consciousness, deliberate action, the pursuit of justice – that only human beings can exercise. To cast aside necessity as nature's concern is to reveal the path of possibility, the only path we ever have had and ever will have.<sup>829</sup> It is a summons to assume the duty and work of principled political commitment, to accept all its consequences, in the creation of human history.

Such are the fundamental political dimensions informing the overall argument of *L'Éternité*. According to Blanqui's astronomical hypothesis humans are not, as one note most likely written in late 1860s maintains, the 'simple outils de l'Eternel'.<sup>830</sup> Within the confines of our world no force but ourselves can determine our collective destiny; only we are capable of deciding upon and changing our future course. The past alone is a '*fait accompli*'. The future remains unmade, unwritten. And we can make it; we can write it. As this unknown future unfolds 'chaque seconde amènera sa bifurcation, le chemin qu'on prendra, celui qu'on aurait pu prendre.' Decisions and action we do not take will certainly be taken by others in other worlds, creating in turn

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<sup>827</sup> Blanqui, 'L'Éternité par les astres', *MA*, p. 371. Spitzer's reading likewise highlights the importance of the 'mais'. See Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 39.

<sup>828</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

<sup>829</sup> 'What is most important in one's own life or history certainly counts for nothing from the perspective of infinite variation and return', Hallward resumes, 'but the indifference is symmetrical, and leaves the domain of our political priorities and possibilities thoroughly untouched.' Hallward shows how this strict division between 'volition and fate' is what distinguishes Blanqui's notion of eternal return from that of Nietzsche – hence the error, which dates back to Benjamin and has persisted ever since, of aligning the two. Hallward, 'Blanqui's bifurcations', pp. 41-42.

<sup>830</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 181 [n.d.].

other possibilities and other histories. Blanqui's analysis is indeed posited on every possible choice and path having been taken infinite times, since the infinite 'ne connaît point l'alternative et a place pour tout.'<sup>831</sup> So while identical worlds and identical peoples result in the same individual and collective histories, the infinity of worlds and humanities does not fail to also account for the infinity of *possible* lives and histories, for the alternative paths and routes that we *might* have taken. In other worlds Napoleon may have won at Waterloo; by equal measure he may have lost at Marengo. Each of our twins follows the paths we ourselves did not, and vice versa.<sup>832</sup> That body doubles do not and cannot warn each other of the consequences of their choices certainly constitutes the 'terrible' aspect of this universal system, Blanqui concedes, for if we were able to provide 'quelques bons conseils' to those who had yet to live out these choices and actions then they would be spared 'des sottises et des chagrins' we have had to endure and eventually overcome across the course of our history, and again the same applies vice versa.<sup>833</sup> But while this 'séquestration des mondes-frères par l'inexorable barrière de l'espace' is no doubt 'mélancolique' in principle, ultimately the impossibility of any common and cumulative human knowledge or experience within the universe's spatio-temporal infinity renders the point simply irrelevant. 'Il nous importe assez peu que nos sosies soient nos voisins', Blanqui therefore concludes.<sup>834</sup> As we cannot ever anticipate the consequences of our choices and commitments the issue cancels itself out without in any way altering the significance of choice and commitment in our world. Here lies the decisive point: even if on other worlds every path and every possible path has been and will be taken

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<sup>831</sup> Blanqui, 'L'Éternité par les astres', *MA*, p. 364.

<sup>832</sup> 'Tout ce qu'on aurait pu être ici-bas, on l'est quelque part ailleurs. Outre son entière vie, de la naissance à la mort, que l'on vit sur une foule de terres, on en vit sur d'autres dix mille éditions différentes' (ibid., p. 365).

<sup>833</sup> Ibid., p. 367

<sup>834</sup> Ibid., pp. 382, 366

an infinite number of times before and after us, that does not alter or diminish our capacity alone, at every moment, to freely choose and pursue a course of action in order to determine what becomes of this world.

This is the lens through which we should read one particularly problematic passage on the fatalist dimensions of this universal system. Reflecting on the cause of ‘des variantes humaines’, Blanqui reapplies the decisive logic of free choice when confronted by alternatives and bifurcations. ‘Quel homme ne se trouve parfois en présence de deux carrières ?’, he asks. ‘Celle dont il se détourne lui ferait une vie bien différente, tout en laissant la même individualité. L’une conduit à la misère, à la honte, à la servitude. L’autre menait à la gloire, à la liberté.’ These sentences expand on and so should be read in conjunction with a preceding passage which likewise foregrounds the world’s endless reproduction of voluntary choice and its corollary: voluntary relinquishment of all other possibilities. ‘À toute minute, à toute seconde, les milliers de directions différentes s’offrent à ce genre humain. Il en choisit une, abandonne à jamais les autres.’ In this sense the claim that immediately follows, ‘on n’échappe pas à la fatalité’,<sup>835</sup> therefore denotes accepting the consequences of the initial choice. Just as we saw in Chapter 2, *L’Éternité* persists - with no less force, with no less import - in the conviction that only through the fatalism of fully assuming all the implications of a free choice, of pursuing a course of action to the end no matter what the consequences, of remaining committed to a principle without recourse to concession or compromise, can the fatalism of externally imposed destiny be exposed as fallacious and duly overcome.

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<sup>835</sup> Ibid., pp. 363-364. On this point see also Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, p. 44.

*Signifying eternity*

Given the clear consistency these statements share with Blanqui's wider thought on history and politics, if not the simple fact that some of these phrases and their essential meanings are found, albeit slightly reworded, elsewhere in his writings, it cannot but seem slightly surprising that *L'Éternité par les astres* has been the subject of such persistent interest - and such persistent misinterpretation - to a far greater degree than any other of Blanqui's writings. Why is this so? Simply the text's seeming incongruity within the predominant preoccupations of Blanqui's life and thought is no doubt a contributing factor. Stylistically *L'Éternité* is dense and oblique, demanding of its reader an investment seldom present (and intentionally avoided) in Blanqui's other major writings.<sup>836</sup> Its astronomical theses afford little room for the immediate, incendiary prose of an *Avis au peuple* or an *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*. Even more atypical and unsettling is indeed its apparent indifference towards politics. These features, when combined with the circumstances of its conception, have invited a certain amount of speculation as to the meaning of the text. With his trial impending in early 1872, did Blanqui, as Geffroy suggests, betray his political convictions in the hope that his scientific breakthroughs would spare him from further imprisonment (he insisted copies of the text be sent to members of the Assembly, the Academies and the press) to the extent that 's'il y a un « document Taschereau » dans son existence inflexible, le voici'?<sup>837</sup> Did Blanqui, as Benjamin

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<sup>836</sup> When beginning the section 'Analyse et synthèse de l'univers' Blanqui concedes that 'nous entrons de droit dans l'obscurité du langage, parce que voici s'ouvrir la question obscure' (Blanqui, 'L'Éternité par les astres', *MA*, p. 354).

<sup>837</sup> Geffroy, *L'Enfermé*, p. 403. (Recall that the 'document Taschereau' of 1848 accused Blanqui of betraying his former comrades). To support this view one might (as does Frank Chouraqui, 'At the Crossroads of History: Blanqui at the Castle of the Bull', in Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*, pp. 7-8, 31-32, for instance) point to a letter to his sister in which Blanqui describes his text as 'tout à fait étranger à la politique et très modéré en tout' (cited in Miguel Abensour and Pelosse, *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*, p. 20). But could this seeming denial of the text's political aspects not be the result of wanting it to be read and taken seriously first and foremost as a piece of scientific analysis? Could Blanqui not have placed greater overall emphasis on its scientific discoveries – which certainly account

and others following him likewise believe, renounce revolution having reconciled himself with its futility, as the defeat of May 1871 had conclusively revealed?<sup>838</sup> Did Blanqui, in short, abandon the political for the cosmological as a result of political or personal circumstances?

Close reading of the text can only lead one to answer such questions in the negative. We have seen that the politics of *L'Éternité* itself and their place within Blanqui's wider project, if not immediately obvious, become clear when the astronomical speculations are carefully examined and correctly understood. Moreover, when *L'Éternité* is properly located within Blanqui's overall life and thought all other concerns as to the possible anomalous status of the text – be they intellectual or biographical – are shown to be similarly inconsequential. In the first instance, Blanqui's interest in the composition of the universe began long before 1871-72. His reflections on the infinite and the possibility of other worlds materially identical to our own have been traced back to 1841 during his imprisonment at Mont-Saint-Michel; later, when an inmate at Belle-Île, he wrote a short piece on man and

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for the majority of the text – yet not at the expense of politics *tout court*? Sincerely believing he had unlocked the secrets of the universe, it seems little wonder that he would place his hopes on these insights to enable him to be saved from further imprisonment and the grave mental and physical suffering it caused him. 'Tout mon recours,' Blanqui pleaded to his sister, 'toute ma défense étaient dans cet ouvrage' (cited in *ibid*, p. 378). Or as Geffroy himself notes: 'Devant le conseil de guerre et devant l'opinion, sa science, son éloquence, sa poésie plaideront' (Geffroy, *L'Enfermé*, p. 403). At the trial itself, however, after hearing the 'commissaire du gouvernement' tell the court that '[j]e veux que vous supprimiez cet homme de la société française', even Blanqui's defence lawyer, Georges Le Chevalier, described, with Blanqui's approval, a life devoted to his ideas: 'Sa vie privée a été tout d'honnêteté et de courage ; on peut condamner ses idées, il en a que je ne partage pas moi-même ; on ne peut pas ne le point estimer'. Blanqui's politics was, then, very much present, with Blanqui himself no less politically combative against his counter-revolutionary accusers and their 'idées monarchiques' in his plea (see Decaux, *Blanqui l'Insurgé*, pp. 593-594). To conclude that at any point in the period between his arrest and trial Blanqui betrayed his political principles seems heavy handed and excessive, to say nothing of the inconsistency it produces with the politics contained within *L'Éternité par les astres* itself.

<sup>838</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 111. Following Benjamin, Frank Chouraqui claims that 'the hard-nosed activist turned speculative prophet', in composing this 'consolation for a life of missed opportunities and for a world that shall never come to be what it ought to' bids a 'final farewell to revolution' (Chouraqui, 'At the Crossroads of History: Blanqui at the Castle of the Bull', pp. 22, 30). See also Bernstein's assertion that Blanqui sought to 'banish himself as far as possible from earth and politics' (Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection*, p. 342).

the universe that in many ways can be seen as a precursor to *L'Éternité*.<sup>839</sup> Though the writing of *L'Éternité* served to divert Blanqui's attention away from the physical and mental hardship of solitary confinement at the Fort Taureau – '[j]e me réfugie dans les astres où l'on peut se promener sans contrainte' – that is not to say that the text itself was apolitical.<sup>840</sup> While its author was not a free political agent, unable to act upon its conclusions, the same was not true of its reader. Moreover, as an intellectual intervention *L'Éternité* was not conceived as a direct response to events in the streets of Paris in May 1871, of which Blanqui remained ignorant as he composed the text.<sup>841</sup> A more likely explanation for Blanqui's sustained interest in the universe would be his lifelong commitment to the Enlightenment ideal of understanding and explaining the world and human existence through reason (hence the passing observation that the text's scientific conclusions disprove the possibility of immaterial 'chimères').<sup>842</sup> A desire to continue and advance the Enlightenment project can certainly be seen to inform Blanqui's assertion, when reflecting on the remaining lacunae within Laplace's cosmogony, that 'l'énigme de l'univers est en permanence devant chaque pensée. L'esprit humain veut la déchiffrer à tout prix.'<sup>843</sup> In turn, writings from the

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<sup>839</sup> See Maurice Dommanget, *Blanqui, La Guerre de 1870-1871 et La Commune* (Paris: Editions Domat-Montchrestien, 1947), pp. 145-147. Dommanget thus notes: 'Se trompent donc lourdement les admirateurs de Blanqui qui considèrent *L'Éternité par les astres* comme un hors-œuvre. C'est une œuvre de pensée profonde, longuement murie' (ibid., p. 145).

<sup>840</sup> Blanqui continues: 'Ce travail est mon seul remède contre la situation déplorable qui m'est fait au physique et au moral par la pauvreté d'aliments matériels et intellectuels' (cited in Dommanget, *Blanqui, La Guerre de 1870-1871 et La Commune*, p. 144). Dommanget's own conclusions here are strangely inconsistent. He suggests, from these extracts, that: 'ne pouvant s'occuper de politique,' Blanqui 's'occupera d'astronomie. Ne pouvant se promener sur terre, il se promènera dans le ciel' (p. 145). Later, having correctly highlighted the text's separation between human affairs and the immutable natural realm, and thus the capacity of human action to change human affairs, Dommanget nonetheless again insists that: 'Après le hiatus philosophique de *L'Éternité par les astres*, Blanqui est décidé à reprendre la lutte, à poursuivre son idéal de transformation sociale' (ibid., p. 155). I would argue the contrary: just as Blanqui never separates philosophy from politics, theory from practice, there is no division between Blanqui the astronomer and Blanqui the political theorist; where the separation between the universe and human politics occurs in the text itself only serves to return Blanqui – as he does towards final sections – to the political concerns of our world with greater force.

<sup>841</sup> Ibid., pp. 138-139.

<sup>842</sup> Blanqui, 'L'Éternité par les astres', *MA*, p. 325.

<sup>843</sup> Ibid., p. 342.



late 1870s, particularly the letters surrounding his election in Bordeaux and the amnesty campaign for the Communards, put paid to any suggestion of a post-Commune defeatism, just as one cannot read this into the meaning of *L'Éternité* itself. As he wrote in July 1879, and summarising the general sentiment of his correspondence at the time: 'Il faut se rallier, toiser l'ennemi et marcher à lui.'<sup>844</sup> Whether from *L'Éternité* itself, from the content of these letters or from his other equally combative writings and activities of the late 1870s,<sup>845</sup> to suggest that by 1872 Blanqui had been defeated and succumbed to his enemy once and for all or that he had in any way renounced the central tenets of his political project is far from true.

Of arguably greatest significance in constructing the text's unique status within Blanqui's life and legacy has been its reception, or rather the principal reader through whom it has been widely received. Benjamin's discovery of this 'cosmic phantasmagoria' in late 1937<sup>846</sup> led him to become, as Hallward notes, Blanqui's 'most influential interlocutor', diffusing his own 'idiosyncratic patronage' of his subject.<sup>847</sup> Benjamin encouraged both interest in *L'Éternité* and in Blanqui as a major historical figure more generally - '[b]efore Lenin, there was no one who had a clearer profile among the proletariat'<sup>848</sup> - but at the price of the subsequent - and remarkably persistent - misunderstanding of the *L'Éternité* as 'an unconditional surrender', the moment when its author, near the end of his life, finally 'yields to bourgeois

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<sup>844</sup> Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 459 [15 July 1879]. 'Il n'est que temps de se réveiller d'une léthargie qui pourrait devenir mortelle', wrote Blanqui during the same period when thanking supporters from Beziers. 'La monarchie pointe à l'horizon de l'opportunisme. Sachons l'apercevoir assez tôt pour la replonger dans le néant', so declared this self-described 'pauvre prisonnier engagé dans la lutte contre la réaction' (Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 457 [June-July 1879]). Another letter defiantly describes his election in Bordeaux as 'un succès grandiose et fait pour *donner du courage* à un parti que *l'opportunisme semblait avoir anéanti*' (Blanqui MSS 9588(2), fo. 459 [14 July 1879]; emphasis in original).

<sup>845</sup> See, for example, 'L'armée esclave et opprimée', 31 October 1880, *MA*, pp. 399-423; 'Athéisme et spiritualisme', 12 and 13 December 1880, *Ni Dieu, Ni Maître*, pp. 17-25.

<sup>846</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 112, 939.

<sup>847</sup> Hallward, 'Blanqui's bifurcations', pp. 36, 40.

<sup>848</sup> Cited in Abensour, *Les passages Blanqui*, p. 29 and Hallward, 'Blanqui's bifurcations', p. 40.

society'.<sup>849</sup> Rather than a restatement of Blanqui's most basic assumptions regarding possibility and necessity, that human volition and human history are strictly separate from the inexorable natural and cosmological world, Benjamin's reading foregrounds the text's supposedly 'merciless speculations that give the lie to the author's revolutionary élan' in which 'basic premises [taken] from the mechanistic natural sciences' present a 'conception of the universe' that ultimately 'proves to be a vision of hell', meriting the designation of a 'theological' reflection as such. Hell, Benjamin suggests, is the complement of the society Blanqui offers simultaneous condemnation of and capitulation to: 'the terrible indictment he pronounces against society takes the form of an unqualified submission to its results' - 'an irony which doubtless escaped the author himself', Benjamin adds - leaving a feeling not of triumphant power but of 'oppression'.<sup>850</sup> As if to reinforce the 'infernal' quality of Blanqui's visions, in which the people are addressed 'as if they were apparitions' and 'natives' this hellish world,<sup>851</sup> Benjamin even cites the passages above concerning human will introducing variation and change in human affairs - passages which in fact contain the basic meaning of the text as a whole - under the banner of 'Blanqui's misanthropy'.<sup>852</sup> This is a puzzling ascription. Humanity cannot make or change the course of the material, natural world or universe – neither does it seek or have to. That in no way means that humanity is 'damned' and deprived of a 'liberating solution' to the multiplying phantasmagorias of the 'commodity-producing' society.<sup>853</sup> Humanity makes human history - it forever does, it forever can. There is neither misanthropy nor 'mythic anguish', still less any 'melancholy' or 'pessimism'<sup>854</sup> to be found here - quite the

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<sup>849</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>850</sup> Ibid., pp. 25, 112.

<sup>851</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>852</sup> Ibid., p. 113. Cf. Abensour and Pelosse, *Libérer l'Enfermé*, p. 33.

<sup>853</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 15.

<sup>854</sup> See ibid., p. 15; Abensour and Pelosse, *Libérer l'Enfermé*, p. 53; Abensour, *Les Passages Blanqui*,

contrary. *L'Éternité* is better read, I think, under the banner of Blanqui's affirmative humanism: within the sublime infinity of the universe we modest, finite beings can make of our society and our history what we will. 'Nous vivons, nous sommes ce que nous sommes, peu de chose', Blanqui wrote in 1868. 'Mais, en reconnaissant ce peu que nous valons, n'est-il pas simple et juste de faire pour le mieux et de rendre plus acceptable notre rôle, si court et si humble, dans le grand drame de l'univers ?'<sup>855</sup> Like *Avis au peuple*, like *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*, like all of Blanqui's writings, *L'Éternité* celebrates this empowering assumption. Those, meanwhile, who read *L'Éternité* through Benjamin's project rather than Blanqui's are led to reproduce the former's misunderstandings and misrepresentations.<sup>856</sup>

### *Making progress*

On the question of historical progress, whether in *L'Éternité* or in Blanqui's wider body of work, Benjamin's reading – and again those who follow it – likewise misses the mark.

One of the 'methodological objectives' of Benjamin's own research project, he explains, is 'to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress', for unlike 'bourgeois habits of thought' historical materialism's 'founding concept is not progress but actualization.'<sup>857</sup> Benjamin

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p. 38, 56.

<sup>855</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 264 [n.d.]; 9592(3), fo. 148 [22 April 1868].

<sup>856</sup> It is above all the failure to grasp the decisive function of the dualism upon which Blanqui constructs his analysis that leads readers to erroneously claim with Benjamin that for Blanqui progress is an illusion and myth (Chouraqui, 'At the Crossroads of History', pp. 18, 34, 38, 52-53; Abensour, *Les Passages Blanqui*, pp. 32, 49, 51), that for Blanqui the course of human history is predetermined and fated by external causal powers (Chouraqui, 'At the Crossroads of History', pp. 20, 34, 49), or that Blanqui was defeated and melancholically resigned to political failure, impotence or the eternal repetition and return of catastrophe (Chouraqui, 'At the Crossroads of History', pp. 30, 33; Abensour, *Les Passages Blanqui*, pp. 21, 56). It is indeed instructive to note that those whose work predates the rise to prominence of Benjamin's reading (see Dommanget and Spitzer in particular) do not share in these misinterpretations, providing generally astute accounts of the text's meaning.

<sup>857</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 460.

elsewhere repeats: ‘The belief in progress - in an infinite perfectibility understood as an infinite ethical task - and the representation of eternal return are complementary’, comprising ‘the indissoluble antinomies in the face of which the dialectical conception of historical time must be developed.’<sup>858</sup> This is all very well when limited to Benjamin’s own thought, but the problem arises in Benjamin’s appeal to Blanqui. Actualization, boundless human perfectibility, moral task – these are all precisely some of the key elements of Blanqui’s conception of progress; yet Benjamin explicitly separates Blanqui from them. ‘The activity of a professional revolutionary such as Blanqui does not presuppose any faith in progress’, Benjamin contends, ‘it presupposes only the determination to do away with present injustice. The irreplaceable political value of class hatred consists precisely in its affording the revolutionary class a healthy indifference toward speculations concerning progress. Indeed, it is just as worthy of humane ends to rise up out of indignation at prevailing injustice as to seek through revolution to better the existence of future generations.’<sup>859</sup>

Benjamin is only partially correct here, and his wish to detach contemporary struggles from any concern for historical progress creates a false dichotomy in Blanqui’s politics. As we have seen, Blanqui certainly does not have faith in progress in the sense of a blind optimism in the historical inevitability of its triumph. Blanqui explicitly insists: ‘Je ne suis pas de ceux qui prétendent que le progrès va de soi, que l’humanité ne peut pas reculer’.<sup>860</sup> Historical progress is in no way synonymous with the passing of historical time, with the mere occurrence of events regardless of their social content and consequences. ‘Ces adorateurs du succès acceptent et acclament comme un progrès tout événement,’ Blanqui acerbically observes, ‘à titre seul

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<sup>858</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>859</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

<sup>860</sup> Cited in Bensaïd and Löwy, ‘Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist’, p. 28.

d'événement. Le temps est un progrès, quoi qu'il amène.'<sup>861</sup> As the centuries progress humanity itself may well regress. But by the same token the assumption that 'la marche des choses humaines' is arbitrary, irregular and varies 'au gré de milliards de caprices' does not by extension rule out the possibility of progress altogether. Blanqui does believe that historical progress is made possible *through* the determined struggle against present injustice. History does not beget progress. Progress is the result of conscious and collective human action. It is neither cumulative nor achieved to the exclusion of regression, hence the importance noted earlier of sounding the alarm against this imminent threat. Where progress has occurred a conflict has been waged, a principle imposed and sustained, a battle triumphant. In no way inevitable, human progress nonetheless forever remains possible. Rather than dismissing progress as the 'phantasmagoria of history'<sup>862</sup> Blanqui's conception of historical time in fact highlights the role of political praxis, of a conscious and deliberate, organised and sustained political will, in confronting and overcoming the contingency of history, with all its obstacles and barriers, in order to *make* progress, to *make* history. Political organisation, present injustice and progress are thus all linked, not divorced. 'Les armes et l'organisation, voilà l'élément décisif du progrès, le moyen sérieux d'en finir avec la misère !'<sup>863</sup> Progress must be *made*; it must be *made possible*. To use Benjamin's own terms, progress *is* actualization.

Blanqui never deviates from this assumption. The temporality of the political struggle for social progress can be seen from his earliest critiques of the law as sanctioning injustice. In spite of 'le cri de faim, poussé par des milliers de malheureux', the 1832 defence speech notes, those who respond to the charge of the existence of 'mauvaises lois' insist that, to ensure the sanctity of the law and

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<sup>861</sup> Blanqui MSS, 9592(3), fo. 161 [24 June 1868].

<sup>862</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>863</sup> Blanqui, 'Avis au peuple', *MA*, p. 167.

continued stability and order, one can only demand legal reform; ‘en attendant,’ Blanqui adds, ‘obéissez’.<sup>864</sup> Wait. Obey. Blanqui’s choice of register when dismissing a politics constrained by what Badiou calls the ‘legal formalism of the state’ is no coincidence.<sup>865</sup> It attests to the conviction that in the struggle for justice and equality there could and so would be no obeying of illegitimate powers, no demanding reforms that will never be granted, no waiting for progress that will never come. Revolutionaries do not ask for new laws, they do not do stand by and comply. 1789 had shown that the privileged few would not voluntarily relinquish their power. 1830 had taught a new generation that when it comes to freedom ‘il ne faut pas attendre, mais qu’il faut prendre.’<sup>866</sup> Any attempt to construct a path to future justice must pass through a direct and immediate political confrontation with the social injustices of the present. This central pillar of Blanqui’s thought is perhaps best articulated in the remarkable ending of Tridon’s article cited earlier in Chapter 2, ‘La Faim’. Declaring that the ‘scandale’ of exorbitant inequalities, of opulence living side by side with starvation must end, Tridon’s text ends with a maxim as remarkable for its rhetorical force as it is for its political insight: ‘La faim justifie les moyens.’<sup>867</sup> Tridon’s *détournement* in many ways cuts to the heart of his master’s politics. For a project defined by the primacy of human agency, by the rejection of social or economic laws and the inevitability of progress, it is the suffering here and now that justifies, that requires, our full, uncompromising engagement and devotion here and now. Imagining ‘the end’ is not the concern. Emancipatory politics is not a question of

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<sup>864</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, *MA*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>865</sup> ‘Communist-type politics is an immanent activity,’ Badiou writes, ‘an activity under the sign of a shared Idea, not an activity determined by external constraints such as the economy or the legal formalism of the state’ (Alain Badiou, ‘The Communist Idea and the Question of Terror’, in *The Idea of Communism Volume 2*, p. 9). Cf. Blanqui, ‘Notre drapeau, c’est l’égalité’, *MA*, p. 107.

<sup>866</sup> Blanqui, ‘Déclaration du Comité provisoire des Ecoles’, 22 January 1831, *MA*, p. 58. See also Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 70.

<sup>867</sup> Gustave Tridon, ‘La Faim’, *La Patrie en Danger*, Monday 19 September 1870.

drawing up a vision of a future society or believing in the inexorable forward march of history as the means to arrive there. All are illusions, all blind alleys that do not confront the problem in hand. Only through a determined conviction and commitment to recognising and tackling existing injustice will progress be made possible. Wherever ‘la faim’ appears, ‘les moyens’ to end it must follow. From this conception of history and progress, that in the face of ‘des cris de détresse d’une population affamée’<sup>868</sup> one cannot indefinitely defer action or comply with the order responsible for that very suffering, comes a central principle of voluntarist politics as outlined by Hallward. Voluntarists from Toussaint L’Ouverture and John Brown to Che Guevara and Paulo Freire hold that, if ‘confronted with indefensible institution[s]’, inequalities or injustices, ‘when the opportunity [arises]’ one must ‘[resolve] to work immediately and by all available means for [their] elimination.’ Voluntarists affirm, writes Hallward, that ‘an idea, like the idea of communism, or equality, or justice, commands that we should strive to realize it without compromises or delay, before the means of such realization have been recognized as feasible or legitimate, or even possible. It is the deliberate striving towards realization itself that will convert the impossible into the possible, and explode the parameters of the feasible.’<sup>869</sup> It is this last point that evades Benjamin in his reading of Blanqui: the historical realisation of the politically possible. Where Benjamin grounds the concept of progress ‘in the idea of catastrophe’,<sup>870</sup> Blanqui grounds it in principled engagement in the name of an affirmative philosophy, in the organised and resolute struggle against present injustice and, above all, in popular instruction.<sup>871</sup> Where for Benjamin the nineteenth-century

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<sup>868</sup> Blanqui, ‘Défense d’Auguste Blanqui au procès des Quinze’, *MA*, p. 70.

<sup>869</sup> Peter Hallward, ‘Communism of the Intellect, Communism of the Will’, in *The Idea of Communism*, p. 112.

<sup>870</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 473.

<sup>871</sup> In the *Critique Sociale* Blanqui in fact explicitly rejects moments of ‘catastrophe’ as adequate bases for social progress. See Blanqui, ‘Le communisme, avenir de la société’, *CSI*, pp. 202-203.

‘bourgeoisie consolidated its positions of power’ through ‘the concept of progress’, a concept within which the doctrine of natural selection in particular ‘popularized the notion that progress was automatic’, enabling it to be further applied to ‘the whole of human activity’ as a result,<sup>872</sup> for Blanqui ‘l’idée si vraie de Darwin sur la sélection naturelle’ could not be interpreted ‘en faveur de l’écrasement du faible au profit du fort’ since, unlike animals, in humanity’s ‘struggle for life’ its capacity for collective, active association is what has enabled it to ‘combattre et d’annuler ces misères de la solitude’. For humanity greater solidarity is ‘l’arme et la protection de faible, sa propriété inviolable et sainte.’<sup>873</sup> ‘Le progrès et la perfection sont en raison directe de cette solidarité’, Blanqui resumes as the meaning of Darwinism for human beings.<sup>874</sup>

Although the concluding section of *L’Éternité par les astres* declares, in a seemingly dramatic rupture with all these previous assertions, that ‘il n’y a pas progrès’,<sup>875</sup> the reader must again be sensitive to the purely astronomical realm to which the statement pertains. Blanqui’s admission that, if ‘jusqu’ici, le passé pour nous représentait la barbarie et l’avenir signifiait progrès, science, bonheur’ this was now an ‘illusion’, is made in light of his discovery of these infinite other worlds within the universe whose histories, as copies of our own, will return with them the same reactionary barbarisms of our past. The according assumption that ‘les ignorances, les sottises, les cruautés des nos vieux âges’ will be seen again in the future ‘sur des milliards de terres’ is referring to the futures of the infinite *copies of* our earth, not of our earth itself.<sup>876</sup> Tragically, the barbarisms of our history thought forever buried and overcome will be faced by our body doubles across their histories. But this does not mean that we and our copies alike cannot still achieve progress for

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<sup>872</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 476.

<sup>873</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3), fo. 148 [22 April 1868].

<sup>874</sup> Blanqui MSS 9590(1), fo. 162 [n.d.].

<sup>875</sup> Blanqui, ‘L’Éternité par les astres’, *MA*, p. 380.

<sup>876</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.



ourselves and do away with these barbarisms in our own times and worlds – as indeed we continually must in order to avert new or resurgent barbarisms. At stake is not our capacity for progress within our world but the recognition that this progress can and will have no bearing or impact on the infinite copies of our world. Progress itself is not the illusion, then; the illusion is infinite and eternal progress across the infinite and eternal universe. Because of the infinite repetition of the same planetary copies, the finite existence of each copy and our inability to communicate from one to the next progress cannot be cumulative across each earth's lifetime. But even if the progress humanities achieve in their histories through their choices and commitments 'est claquemuré sur chaque terre et s'évanouit avec elle' then so be it, for so long as we terrestrial beings remain concerned with the task, our only possible task, of shaping our history and changing our world, the relative insignificance this progress means for the cosmos does not diminish its significance for us.<sup>877</sup>

Since the central thesis of *L'Éternité* is consistent with the philosophical and political tenets Blanqui had established in some cases long before 1871-72, adding an astronomical context that simply extends – albeit to an infinite scale of course – the architecture in which the same political project still resides, should its role and position within his enterprise not be reconsidered? What is the meaning of *L'Éternité par les astres* within Blanqui's project? Above all *L'Éternité* represents Blanqui's most sustained exploration of the manner in which human history, the history of human *pensée-volonté*, is cast against the immanence of natural law and the infinity of time and space, an eternal and boundless cosmos. However flawed its scientific assumptions may now appear, its compelling force endures: *L'Éternité* is no less than an account of the universe and human life, as formidable and sobering in its scope as

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<sup>877</sup> Ibid., pp. 380-382.

it is empowering in its political implications. That it does not challenge or alter so much as reaffirm Blanqui's most basic philosophical assumptions would suggest that as an exposition of Blanqui's project its significance has been overstated. That it nonetheless affords a remarkable insight into the power and range of Blanqui's thought would suggest that as testament to the inspiring spirit of Blanqui's project its significance endures.

Blanqui's overall understanding of history and progress will now be familiar. Beginning with the primacy of thought and ideas, Blanqui attributes historical change to philosophical change. History is the account of the role of human thought and consciousness in determining human affairs. By the same token, however, to attain its capacity for change thought must be exercised as an act; the capacity of an idea to change human affairs forever rests on those willing to act in its name. These assumptions lead Blanqui, throughout all aspects of his life and thought, to maintain the primacy of free choice, decision and commitment, strictly divorced from any form of objective laws or powers, as the means by which social progress is realised across the course of human history. Progress, as Blanqui conceives it, is the result of this collective political praxis. But progress is also, Blanqui adds, forever exposed to its own undoing. An undetermined history is necessarily open to regression and new injustices. The alternative of 'socialism or barbarism' thus presents itself at all moments of humanity's past, present and future. The choice is our own, the path our own making. *L'Éternité par les astres*, to re-quote Hobsbawm on the *Manifesto*, is no less a 'document of choices, of political possibilities rather than probabilities, let alone certainties'<sup>878</sup> than any other of Blanqui's writings. If at first the astronomical

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<sup>878</sup> Hobsbawm, 'Introduction', in Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 27.

hypothesis seems to depart entirely from the politics of our earth it is a detour via the stars from which Blanqui's militant politics re-emerge and reassert themselves with ever-greater force, ever-greater urgency.

### **Conclusion: Blanqui today**

‘Un homme dont la vie entière n’a été qu’une longue et douloureuse lutte contre la tyrannie, un dévouement passionné à la cause du peuple.’<sup>879</sup>

I want to conclude by considering three points that have served to frame this thesis. First, I outline what I take to be the fundamental and most consequential assumptions of Blanqui’s politics, as well as its major ambiguities and limitations. Second, I turn to the question – at times implicit across the preceding pages – of the meaning and relevance of Blanqui’s politics for emancipatory politics today, with a reflection on some of the enduring critical insights it provides. Finally, I offer some suggestions as to the priorities in terms of future work on Blanqui’s life and thought and where a return to Blanqui might fruitfully lead.

### **Blanqui’s militant politics...**

Contrary to the enduring image of Blanqui as nothing more than an unthinking, a-theoretical insurrectionist, this thesis began with the assertion that Blanqui should be rediscovered today as both a thinker and practitioner of revolutionary politics. I have argued that throughout the declarations and articles, pamphlets and polemics, personal notes and correspondence that make up Blanqui’s body of thought, his fundamental aim, as Gramsci wrote of Machiavelli, is to always ‘bring everything back to politics’.<sup>880</sup> The most significant category of Blanqui’s politics is, in my opinion, that

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<sup>879</sup> Blanqui MSS 9580, fo. 84 [n.d.]; Blanqui, ‘Premier texte autobiographique’, 1849-1852, *OI*, p. 40.

<sup>880</sup> Gramsci, ‘State and Civil Society’, in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 249.

of ‘une intelligence unie à une volonté’, what he calls ‘*pensée-volonté*’.<sup>881</sup> We have seen how Blanqui constructs his entire political project on and around this concept: it explains the primacy he accords to thought, ideas and education in underpinning human affairs; it explains his fundamental insistence on resolute commitment to the principles of equality and justice; it explains his notion of the people as a conscious collective political actor and ‘proletarian’ as the articulation of a subjective political position; above all, it explains the assertion that conscious volition determines and so has the capacity to change the course of human history and realise social justice. In every respect, for Blanqui politics is a matter of conscious, enlightened thought and deliberate, voluntary action.

To affirm the centrality of *pensée-volonté* is first to recognise the basic function within Blanqui’s worldview of philosophy as determinant of social arrangements. I have reasserted the extent to which ideas, thought and education have a foundational role in Blanqui’s project. Education is a decisive political mechanism, Blanqui believes, the central means by which domination and exploitation are perpetuated or ceased. The conflict between ignorance and enlightenment is, then, the primary battlefield upon which political struggles are waged. One of the major tensions in Blanqui’s project indeed exists between this enlightened consciousness and the processes of popular empowerment. Insofar as Blanqui sees human will as a product of and conditioned by human thought, failure to have attained the necessary level of enlightenment precludes the exercise of genuine volition. To be a decisive political actor is to be capable of *pensée-volonté*. To choose and remain committed to the cause of justice over injustice presupposes consciousness of the initial choice itself. Like Rousseau, in Blanqui’s eyes those who are miseducated, deceived and thus

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<sup>881</sup> Blanqui MSS 9592(3) fo. 53-54, [15 April 1868].

unconscious are also at present incapable of collectively exercising the form of self-determination that will arrive at and govern a truly free and equal society.

Blanqui is no doubt right to insist on the importance of being properly informed as the prerequisite to making the free choices upon which political action is based; he is right that the deliberate dissemination of misinformation in the service of particular socio-political interests prevents this process. But he often places too great an emphasis on this point. He too often creates a gap between knowledge and ignorance, between an enlightened elite and the ignorant masses, thereby overstating the possibility for decisive political engagement on the part of ordinary people. In many ways these basic assumptions led Blanqui to his organisational misadventures, when a vanguard group set about taking action in the name of rather than with and through the people.<sup>882</sup> Moreover, in the employment of a transitional apparatus as the means by which the revolutionary process would advance after the initial seizure of power, Blanqui's thinking likewise attests to the same assumption of an inseparable gap between the capacity for decisive political action enlightened thought alone accords and the manner by which those presently deprived of that thought are incapable of decisive action, for which instruction is the only remedy. It is in this sense of a strict division between the means and ends within an emancipatory process that Blanqui's proposals for a 'dictature Parisienne' prefigure the problem of how to align political and social change the Leninist project would confront and emphatically

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<sup>882</sup> 'Dans les périodes historiques de ce genre,' Geffroy writes of the situation in Paris in September-October 1870, 'si les soldats peuvent créer le chef, le chef ne peut susciter les soldats.' Blanqui's failure to meaningfully shape and strategically reflect popular consciousness would at times leave him, as Geffroy's vivid image suggests, 'un général sans armée', unable to initiate the popular empowerment to which he aspired (see Geffroy, *L'Enfermé*, pp. 333-334). It would, however, be inaccurate to claim, as does Geffroy, that Blanqui continually found himself in these circumstances across the course of his life. We have seen that the secret conspiratorial cell can certainly be seen as a product of a specific political context, when state repression pushed any opposition underground. And Blanqui did not persist with these organisational forms when political conditions allowed for more open agitation in and amongst the masses, as seen in 1848, for example. That said, there were no doubt moments – 1839, 1870 - when Geffroy's imagery holds true.

fail to resolve. As Hardt convincingly shows in the work of Jefferson, it seems that any attempt to confront anew the problem of transition must begin by thinking and practising social and political transformation together so as to pursue a politics of *self*-emancipation.

Voluntary choice and resolute commitment therefore form the heart of Blanqui's militant politics. We have seen that without foregrounding the importance of commitment and the conflict it begets, without examining the assumptions behind and consequences of this essential point, we cannot understand Blanqui's project as a whole. Emanating from a Rousseauist account of property, history and contemporary social relations, politics, as Blanqui conceives it, presupposes taking a side to the absolute exclusion of any semblance of impartiality or so-called middle ground. Whether through active affiliation or passive complicity a side is always taken. Blanqui's uncompromising sense of allegiance and conviction, and particularly the moral dimensions therein, finds few counterparts. In his life and work alike Blanqui shows with remarkable clarity and power that an informed, principled decision then requires principled, unwavering commitment; a politics of free choice is meaningless without accepting the consequences - however difficult, however demanding - the choice will necessarily impose. Subjective factors such as an enlightened faith and a sense of moral duty that sustain a principled choice must therefore be recognised as a key concern within Blanqui's thought, particularly since they inform his conception of the political actor.

We have seen that Blanqui maintains the need for a leading actor, the enlightened workers of Paris, whose vanguard political role relies first and foremost on their concentrated intellectual supremacy over the nation as a whole. Parisians' shared consciousness of their plight, their knowledge and understanding of the

established social order as one of exploitation and domination, will confer upon them an unrivalled strength of force through their willingness to fight with a sense of ardent commitment and fervent devotion to their cause. This is, for Blanqui, the *sine qua non* of the revolutionary actor. Only a lack of organisation and discipline can prevent this determined collective force voluntarily acting for the triumph of an idea from overthrowing the forces of the state, Blanqui believes.

The centrality within this notion of agency of choice and commitment indeed enabled us to comprehend Blanqui's contentious conception of the people and the proletariat more fundamentally as a political actor. Collective actors are, for Blanqui, not *a priori* constructions produced through objective historical or economic processes but the result of conscious decisions, voluntary action and collective empowerment. Through a reading of Laclau's account of populism we have seen that Blanqui's intentionally broad notions of the people and the proletariat must be read primarily not as socio-economic but political concepts. For Blanqui to be a proletarian is to subjectively affirm of your commitment to the oppressed. As we saw in light of Rancière's work, Blanqui's concept of the people or the proletariat is also one that recognises the everyday yet unseen suffering of all the excluded, no matter what their specific socio-economic role or position, whose exclusion will end as a result of the process of their active empowerment.

Taken as a whole, what distinguishes Blanqui above all from his 'utopian' contemporaries, thereby building on the Rousseauist-Jacobin project whilst anticipating the approaches of figures like Lenin, Guevara and also Marx in certain respects, is the assumption that social change is first and foremost a matter of politics – that is, of conscious collective volition, of state power, of popular empowerment. Blanqui was arguably the first socialist thinker to maintain that only in recognising



these basic political factors, and only by organising and implementing the practical means and forces necessary to see to these tasks, can the struggle to establish real social equality and justice begin. To an unrivalled extent in his own time, and with a force of insight that resonates beyond it, Blanqui forever asserts that emancipation is an actual project that will require dedicated work, perseverance and resolve. Unlike his contemporaries Blanqui became acutely aware of the obstacles and resistance a movement for popular empowerment will confront and have to overcome. In the aftermath of July 1830 Blanqui discovered that revolution is not a single event but a continuous process whose success will rely on harnessing its actors' concentrated collective capacities so as to simultaneously proceed and persist whilst avoiding the ever-present risk of manipulation and fragmentation to which disempowerment and defeat are owed.

Of major importance to Blanqui's perspective here is his distinctive, staunch rejection of all forms of determinism within the realm of human affairs. To reject any belief in objective socio-economic laws, pre-determined natural fate or historical necessity is to advance social progress as a collective project that forever remains politically possible – from his proclamations during the *Trois Glorieuses* of 1830 to *L'Éternité par les astres* of 1872, Blanqui held to this conviction, I have argued. Blanqui has no illusions about the task at hand or the efforts demanded in achieving this task. But such tasks and such efforts are in no way beyond us. To repeat the fundamental maxim formulated in 1832: 'nous le pouvons ! si nous le voulons'.<sup>883</sup> The history of popular struggles proves time and time again that if we are willing to do what is necessary in order to realise a goal or principle then it can be done – such is the basic assumption of Blanqui's voluntarism.

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<sup>883</sup> Blanqui, 'Rapport à la Société des Amis du peuple', 2 February 1832, *MA*, p. 98.

The primacy accorded to politics does lead Blanqui, however, to neglect wider factors in affecting and shaping political struggles and engagements. To maintain ‘collective self-determination – more than an assessment of what seems feasible or appropriate’ as ‘the animating principle of political action’ must nonetheless still take proper account of the ‘objective forms of determination’ through which subjective determination appears and advances.<sup>884</sup> The image of Blanqui as a blind adventurer, completely ignorant of and indifferent to the constraints of circumstance is unfounded. But he does nonetheless fail - unlike Gramsci, one might add<sup>885</sup> - to take sufficient account of the grounds on which collective political action is organised and exercised.

Where Blanqui’s responses and solutions fall short, his strength remains in his recognition of and wrestling with some of the most basic, inescapable concerns of emancipatory politics - agency and commitment, state power and popular empowerment, amongst others - that many of his contemporaries, and indeed many others since, ignore as inconsequential or simply reject outright. Blanqui’s project, in short, is inadequate yet indispensable.<sup>886</sup> Now is the time to return to Blanqui, to confront these problems and questions of his age and ours.

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<sup>884</sup> Hallward, ‘The Will of the People’, p. 17.

<sup>885</sup> ‘Politics becomes permanent action and gives birth to permanent organisations’, Gramsci writes in one instructive passage, ‘precisely in so far as it identifies itself with economics. But it also distinct from it, which is why one may speak separately of economics and politics, and speak of “political passion” as of an immediate impulse to action which is born on the “permanent and organic” terrain of economic life but which transcends it, bringing into play emotions and aspirations in whose incandescent atmosphere even calculations involving the individual human life itself obey different laws from those of individual profit, etc’ (Gramsci, ‘The Modern Prince’, in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 139-140).

<sup>886</sup> Here I paraphrase Cornel West’s take on the relevance of Marxism today in ‘An Interview with Cornel West on Occupy, Obama and Marx’, *Counterpunch*, 30-32 November 2012 <<http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/11/30/an-interview-with-cornel-west-on-occupy-obama-and-marx/>>

### ... today?

What is the significance of Blanqui's militant politics today? Here I will propose three points under the broad headings of *temporality*, *agency* and *strategy*. It should be made clear that in all such respects it is not a case of simply repeating Blanqui.<sup>887</sup> To say that Blanqui's politics are of enduring value and interest is not to advocate their root and branch adoption, or indeed to suppose their original form could still apply today. The challenge, rather, is to locate and extract basic principles, practices and assumptions that may be effectively re-imagined for and applied to our own times.

#### 1. *A political temporality*

There is an instructive unity between Blanqui's conception of history and history's conception of Blanqui. Blanqui's voluntarist rejection of 'objective laws' or external forces pre-determining or exercising principal causality over humanity's social arrangements, politics and history has been consistently rejected ever since as Blanqui's voluntarist ignorance. 'What other revolutionary, of thought or action,' Rancière is correct to ask, 'has ever proposed such a radical gap between the "objective conditions" of action and the courage of his enterprise? It is understandable that posterity has preferred to retain the reassuring image of an unrepentant conspirator who was regrettably ignorant of the laws of history.'<sup>888</sup> Blanqui's open and undetermined view of history, its privileging of political possibility over historical necessity, its absolute opposition to any form of fatalist teleology, would mark some of Blanqui's most notable readers, from Benjamin to Bensaïd, who in the

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<sup>887</sup> Cf. Slavoj Žižek, 'Afterword: Lenin's Choice', in V.I. Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 310-311.

<sup>888</sup> Rancière, 'The Radical Gap', p. 25.

nineteenth-century revolutionary discovered paths out of the blind alleys into which twentieth-century emancipatory politics had been led.

The twenty-first century wrestles with these issues perhaps like never before. Today, ‘in our bleak age so adoring of every form of necessity’, to again invoke Rancière’s characterisation,<sup>889</sup> Blanqui invites us to reject any appeal to historical necessity, to ‘the end of history’, and to re-imagine the politics of possibility. In the ruins of ‘scientific socialism’ and any pretensions to have discovered the internal logic of history with its immutable processes, Blanqui’s resolute anti-determinism and anti-positivism re-emerge with timely forcefulness. Foregrounding a politics rooted in a non-determinist view of history indeed has important implications for how we read Marx today. To return to Marx in light of Blanqui is to do away with any historical determinism in the former – be it sometimes absent, sometimes latent, sometimes manifest – that may deny or deviate from the primacy of politics as collective volition. Blanqui offers an exceptionally lucid, at times compelling dismissal of the claims to recognise ‘the inevitable movement of history’ and the according need to move with it. Blanqui recognises with arresting urgency that the organised, collective political action of today can, and must, advance the cause of equality and justice tomorrow. There is no such thing as historical fate or inevitable future destiny, Blanqui tells us. There are only the choices and commitments of the present.

## 2. *A political agency*

In a passage from the preparatory notes for the *Procès des Poudres* of 1836 Blanqui outlines the ruling ideology of his time, which arguably has similarities with the neo-liberalism of our own. ‘L’égalité est une chimère, le dévouement une sottise. Que

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<sup>889</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

chacun se dévoue à soi-même, il n'aura pas besoin du dévouement des autres. Nous n'avons qu'un devoir ici bas, c'est de nous enrichir. Au plus adroit et au plus fort le champ est libre. Ceux qui rêvent de Bonheur universel sont des insensés ou des fanatiques.<sup>890</sup> Against the chorus of self-interest and the pursuit of personal wealth and power,<sup>891</sup> if the lone voice calling for passionate devotion to a collective ideal is to be labeled that of a crazed fanatic then such labels cannot but be fully embraced. 'Oui, mes amis, nous sommes des fous', Blanqui declares. 'Nous avons une foi, nous avons des croyances austères, passionnées. Nous ne sommes pas grâce à Dieu, des Républicains d'un jour, enthousiastes la veille, apostats le lendemain. ... Tant que crieront vers nous les gémissements des enfants du peuple qui ont faim, tant que le veau d'or sera Dieu, l'égalité proscrite, la probité bafouée, le vice triomphant, la vertu écrasée, nous resterons ce que nous sommes.'<sup>892</sup> These passages not only recast what it means for individuals to be active participants in society rather than simply passively accepting and unquestioningly acting according to the established order of things. They also attest to the rebel's determined faith and conviction; to the revolutionary's dedication and duty; to their defiance and dissent; to their belief in and enthusiastic passion for the possibility of creating a better society – all of which are fundamental to Blanqui's conception of militant political agency.

This resolute commitment to first principles can and should have strong reverberations today as attempts are made to rethink the actor and agency or the subject and subjectivity for a renewed emancipatory politics. To reaffirm with the authors of *The Germany Ideology* that “‘communism is the real movement overcoming the existing state of affairs’ ... changes nothing about the situation,’

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<sup>890</sup> Blanqui, 'Procès des poudres', 2-11 August 1836, *OI*, p. 353.

<sup>891</sup> On this point see also Blanqui, 'Rapport gigantesque de Thiers sur l'assistance publique', 1850, *CSII*, p. 246.

<sup>892</sup> Blanqui, 'Procès des poudres', *OI*, p. 353.

Balibar rightly tells us, ‘because subjects can either resist the movement or contribute to it, and they contribute to it only if they desire it, whatever the conditions, material or spiritual, which can facilitate or even produce this subjective orientation.’ It follows that ‘idealism is the condition for communist commitment’.<sup>893</sup> Today, then, the questions and concerns of Blanqui’s project should be reposed: What are the conditions of ‘idealist’ political commitment? How do they inform the approach and response to difficulties and defeats, obstacles and impasses as they necessarily appear in the course of political sequences, be they local or general, short or long? How are commitment and determination, purpose and perseverance sustained, both individually and collectively? Is there a role or function for a form of (quasi-theological or moral) faith, belief or duty in order to pursue and realise a collective goal or principle? The lasting lesson of Blanqui’s own militancy is the resolute, uncompromising manner in which his own life bore witness to his own politics. Blanqui took a side; he made a decision and accepted its consequences. Efforts to rethink what Balibar calls, after Badiou, the ‘practical idealism’<sup>894</sup> of political agency would learn a great deal from arguably the nineteenth century’s leading exemplar of ‘communism as commitment’.

### 3. *A political strategy*

The extent to which Blanqui’s socio-political analysis in certain respects resonates with the present historico-political moment is striking. The critiques of a financial oligarchy, of a corrupted democracy (see the description of a government which ‘concentre les trois pouvoirs entre les mains d’un petit nombre de privilégiés unis par

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<sup>893</sup> Balibar, ‘Communism as Commitment, Imagination and Politics’, p. 15.

<sup>894</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15. See also Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 514, 578. Badiou’s subsequent attempts to rethink the Idea of communism – a notion that carries certain salient aspects of Blanqui’s thought – likewise offers many fruitful comparisons here worth exploring further.

les mêmes intérêts<sup>895</sup>) of a growing division between rich and poor – these lines could quite credibly be written today.<sup>896</sup> In a sense, then, Blanqui is our contemporary. This might - though need not have to - lend greater force to the basic strategic insights Blanqui outlines in response.

Blanqui is perhaps the first socialist thinker to seriously pose the question of political strategy. Blanqui's strategic concerns derive from the recognition of a central, decisive factor confronting all movements for social change: political power. One of the most significant innovations of Blanqui's project is the understanding that without taking, retaining and exercising political power any attempt to enact lasting social change will bear no fruit. Such assumptions run contrary to much contemporary radical political praxis, however. Leaderless, horizontal movements eschewing questions regarding the mechanisms of popular empowerment have dominated the most prominent popular movements, certainly in the UK and US, across the political sequence that began in 2011.<sup>897</sup> These movements, though no doubt inspiring, revealed themselves the limits of their political strategy, for so long as the means by which power can be collectively taken, sustained and exercised is evaded these collective actions will continually be subsumed by the status quo, leaving no trace other than that of a momentary rupture. History shows, as Blanqui knew, that the realisation of lasting social change relies on political action extending beyond localised, ephemeral disruption and resistance. Blanqui's simple yet decisive question thus bears repeating: how do a people go from exclusion from to constitution of political power as the basis of enduring social change? Today many are returning to

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<sup>895</sup> Blanqui, 'Défense d'Auguste Blanqui au process des Quinze', 12 January 1832, *MA*, p. 69.

<sup>896</sup> See also: 'On ne peut pas le nier, c'est la Bourse aujourd'hui qui est le centre de la vie matérielle de la nation, et par malheur, cette vie matérielle devient chaque jour davantage toute la vie sociale' (Blanqui MSS 9586, fo. 401 [n.d.]).

<sup>897</sup> For an overview of the Occupy Wall Street movement and the theoretical assumptions on which its tactics were based, see David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

this question and re-engaging with thinkers of political strategy (Gramsci, Poulantzas, Laclau and Mouffe, Bensaïd). Blanqui, for his part, offers an antidote to those who, like in his own day, still believe it possible to *Change the World Without Taking Power*.<sup>898</sup> None of this is to say of course that a return to the Leninist party, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and so on, still less Blanqui's variants of these organisational forms, provide the solution. But it is to affirm that *forms* of organisation and leadership are necessary. Blanqui recognised the fundamental imperative – that is, there is no effective social struggle without political organisation. Blanqui is correct in diagnosing this basic problem, even if his own remedies are, needless to say, far from satisfactory. The solutions remain to be discovered. The ongoing popular movements in Greece and Spain, which themselves also began with or took their impetus from mass demonstrations, strikes and occupations, have indeed shown the importance of translating and concentrating these localised mobilisations into organised political forms capable of constituting and exercising power at a national level. Where these political groups, sequences and the possibilities they hold will lead is unclear at the time of writing. What is clear, however, is that their respective achievements and failings alike will provide important strategic lessons.

### **Future directions**

This thesis has never been conceived as the last word on Blanqui. Quite the contrary: I hope it will make a modest contribution towards beginning a wider re-engagement with an overlooked figure. So what principal work remains to be done, and where might returning to Blanqui lead?

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<sup>898</sup> See John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).



The major obstacle to the dissemination of Blanqui's thought, particularly in the Anglophone world, remains the unavailability of his writings.<sup>899</sup> Anthologies of selected writings are imperative if Blanqui is to be seriously re-read and re-thought today. Of course this is not to speak of the volumes of unpublished manuscripts. One hopes a series of Blanqui's collected works could eventually see the light of day, continuing the work began by Dominique Le Nuz over twenty years ago.

Such primary work would enable and encourage further secondary studies. Historians would have no shortage of potential lines of inquiry. A new biography is long overdue. Blanqui's quite extraordinary life, his role in and influence on the revolts and revolutions of the nineteenth century all warrant re-visiting and reappraisal. The dual lives of Auguste and his older brother, the liberal economist Adolphe, would likewise provide a great deal of interest. Beyond Blanqui's own political experiences there also remains much more to uncover about Blanquism as both a movement taking the name, as seen in the France from the Second Empire until the end of the century, and as a wider political tendency that could be traced from the Narodniks to certain guerrilla struggles of the twentieth century. Blanqui's thought likewise gives rise to numerous themes on which more sustained reflections should be granted. These may include, amongst others, the politics of education, the concept of history and conflict as an axiom of socio-political thought and practice.

In this thesis where possible and appropriate I have suggested comparisons with other thinkers with whom I think Blanqui shares certain affinities and which have been hitherto largely overlooked in both studies of Blanqui himself and in

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<sup>899</sup> A chicken and egg scenario may have been played out, of course: has the lack of interest in Blanqui's thought resulted in the failure to publish his writings, or has the failure to publish his writings resulted in the lack of interest in his thought? Given the years that have passed since the appearance - from a widely read and respected publishing house, we might add - of *Maintenant, il faut des armes* and the continued lack of re-engagement with their content, one might be forced to side with the former hypothesis.

readings of his forerunners, contemporaries and descendents. More detailed comparative studies with Rousseau and Marx in particular would be instructive in the understanding of both sides. One might also add that Machiavelli (perhaps via Gramsci) as well as Lenin and Trotsky but also Benjamin, Bensaïd and Badiou would each in their own way provide stimulating interlocutors. The dual lives and projects of Blanqui and Che Guevara would provide an especially rich point of reflection. Both figures could be said respectively to represent the nineteenth- and twentieth-century embodiments of a rare breed of political engagement. Men of action, men of ideas, men of principles, the extent to which their political commitments were indivisible from every phase of their adult lives cannot fail to invite consideration of what it meant to be a militant revolutionary in their respective historical epochs and what one might infer from this today. It may in fact serve to reveal a major ‘missed encounter’, to borrow the phrase proposed by Balibar when undertaking a similar exercise,<sup>900</sup> of the modern revolutionary tradition.

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<sup>900</sup> Étienne Balibar, ‘Lenin and Gandhi: A missed encounter?’, *Radical Philosophy*, 172 (March-April 2012).

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